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MEMOIRS

OF

ROBERT-HOUDIN

AMBASSADOR, AUTHOR, AND CONJUROR.

WRITTEN BY HIMSELF.

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IN TWO VOLUMES.—VOL. II.

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CHAPTER I.

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FONTENELLE says, somewhere or other, "There is no success, however merited, in which luck does not have a share;" and, although I was of the same opinion as the illustrious Academician, I determined by sheer toil to diminish as much as in me lay the share luck could claim in *my* success. In the first place, I redoubled my efforts to improve the execution of my

tricks, and when I believed I had attained that result, I tried to correct a fault which, I felt, must injure my performance. This was speaking too rapidly; and my "patter," recited in a schoolboy tone, thus lost much of its effect. I was drawn in this false direction by my natural vivacity, and I had great trouble in correcting it; however, by resolutely attacking my enemy, I managed to conquer it.

This victory was doubly profitable to me: I performed with much less fatigue, and had the pleasure of noticing, in the calmness of my audience, that I had realised the scenic truth, "the more slowly a story is told, the shorter it seems." In fact, if you pronounce slowly, the public, judging from your calmness that you take an interest in what you are saying, yield to your influence and listen to you with sustained attention. If, on the contrary, your words reveal a desire to finish quickly, your auditors gradually submit to the influence of this restlessness, and they are as anxious as yourself to hear the end of your story.

I have said that people of the first rank came to my theatre, but I noticed, on the other hand, to my regret, that my pit was scantily filled. As I was ambitious to have my room thronged, I thought I could not effect

this more easily than by making my theatre better known than I had hitherto done.

From time immemorial it has been the custom, at conjuring performances, to distribute small presents to the audience, in order to "maintain their friendship." Toys were generally selected, which spectators of all ages contended for; and this often made Comte say at the moment of distribution, "Here are toys for great children and small." These presents had a very ephemeral existence, and as nothing indicated their origin, they could attract no attention to the giver. While, then, I was as liberal as my predecessors, I wished that my little presents should keep up for a longer period the remembrance of my name and experiments. Instead of dolls and other similar objects, I distributed to my spectators, under the form of presents produced by magic, illustrated comic journals, elegant fans, albums, and rebuses, all accompanied by bouquets and excellent bonbons. Each article bore, not only the inscription "Recollections of Robert-Houdin's fantastic soirées," but also details of my performances, according to the nature of the article. These were generally presented in the shape of verses. The thing that caused me the most trouble was my comic journal, the

"Cagliostro," which I was forced to edit at the expense of my night's rest. The audience were amused by my jests, and the perusal of the paper between the acts gave me a little more time to make my preparations.

The experiment, however, to which I owed my reputation was one inspired by that fantastic god to whom Pascal attributes all the discoveries of this sublunary world: chance led me straight to the invention of *second sight.*

My two children were playing one day in the drawing-room at a game they had invented for their own amusement. The younger had bandaged his elder brother's eyes, and made him guess the objects he touched, and when the latter happened to guess right, they changed places. This simple game suggested to me the most complicated idea that ever crossed my mind.

Pursued by the notion, I ran and shut myself up in my workroom, and was fortunately in that happy state when the mind follows easily the combinations traced by fancy. I rested my head in my hands, and, in my excitement, laid down the first principles of second sight.

It would require a whole volume to describe the numberless combinations of this experiment; but this description, far too serious for these memoirs, will find a place in a special work, which will also contain the explanation of my theatrical tricks. Still, I cannot resist the desire of cursorily explaining some of the preliminary experiments to which I had recourse before I could make the trick perfect.

My readers will remember the experiment suggested to me formerly by the pianist's dexterity, and the strange faculty I succeeded in attaining: I could read while juggling with four balls. Thinking seriously of this, I fancied that this "perception by appreciation" might be susceptible of equal development, if I applied its principles to the memory and the mind.

I resolved, therefore, on making some experiments with my son Emile, and, in order to make my young assistant understand the nature of the exercise we were going to learn, I took a domino, the cinq-quater for instance, and laid it before him. Instead of letting him count the points of the two numbers, I requested the boy to tell me the total at once.

"Nine," he said.

Then I added another domino, the quater-tray.

"That makes sixteen," he said, without any hesitation.

I stopped the first lesson here; the next day we succeeded in counting at a single glance four dominoes, the day after six, and thus we at length were enabled to give instantaneously the product of a dozen dominoes.

This result obtained, we applied ourselves to a far more difficult task, over which we spent a month. My son and I passed rapidly before a toy-shop, or any other displaying a variety of wares, and cast an attentive glance upon it. A few steps further on we drew paper and pencil from our pockets, and tried which could describe the greater number of objects seen in passing. I must own that my son reached a perfection far greater than mine, for he could often write down forty objects, while I could scarce reach thirty. Often feeling vexed at this defeat, I would return to the shop and verify his statement, but he rarely made a mistake.

My male readers will certainly understand the possibility of this, but they will recognise the difficulty. As for my lady readers, I am convinced beforehand

they will not be of the same opinion, for they daily perform far more astounding feats. Thus, for instance, I can safely assert that a lady seeing another pass at full speed in a carriage, will have had time to analyse her toilette from her bonnet to her shoes, and be able to describe not only the fashion and quality of the stuffs, but also say if the lace be real, or only machine made. I have known ladies do this.

This natural, or acquired, faculty among ladies, but which my son and I had only gained by constant practice, was of great service in my performances, for while I was executing my tricks, I could see everything that passed around me, and thus prepare to foil any difficulties presented me. This exercise had given me, so to speak, the power of following two ideas simultaneously, and nothing is more favourable in conjuring than to be able to think at the same time both of what you are saying and of what you are doing. I eventually acquired such a knack in this, that I frequently invented new tricks while going through my performances. One day, even, I made a bet I would solve a problem in mechanics while taking my part in conversation. We were talking of the pleasure of a country life, and I calculated during this time the quantity of

wheels and pinions, as well as the necessary cogs, to produce certain revolutions required, without once failing in my reply.

This slight explanation will be sufficient to show what is the essential basis of second sight, and I will add that a secret and unnoticeable correspondence existed between my son and myself, by which I could announce to him the name, nature, and bulk of objects handed me by spectators.

As none understood my mode of action, they were tempted to believe in something extraordinary, and, indeed, my son Emile, then aged twelve, possessed all the essential qualities to produce this opinion, for his pale, intellectual, and ever thoughtful face represented the type of a boy gifted with some supernatural power.

Two months were incessantly employed in erecting the scaffolding of our tricks, and when we were quite confident of being able to contend against the difficulties of such an undertaking, we announced the first representation of second sight. On the 12th of February, 1846, I printed in the centre of my bill the following singular announcement:

"*In this performance M. Robert-Houdin's son, who*

is gifted with a marvellous second sight, after his eyes have been covered with a thick bandage, will designate every object presented to him by the audience."

I cannot say whether this announcement attracted any spectators, for my room was constantly crowded; still I may affirm, what may seem very extraordinary, that the experiment of second sight, which afterwards became so fashionable, produced no effect on the first performance. I am inclined to believe that the spectators fancied themselves the dupes of accomplices, but I was much annoyed by the result, as I had built on the surprise I should produce; still, having no reason to doubt its ultimate success, I was tempted to make a second trial, which turned out well.

The next evening I noticed in my room several persons who had been present on the previous night, and I felt they had come a second time to assure themselves of the reality of the experiment. It seems they were convinced, for my success was complete, and amply compensated for my former disappointment.

I especially remember a mark of singular approval with which one of my pit audience favoured me. My son had named to him several objects he offered in succession; but not feeling satisfied, my incredulous

friend, rising, as if to give more importance to the difficulty he was about to present, handed me an instrument peculiar to cloth merchants, and employed to count the number of threads. Acquiescing in his wish, I said to my boy, "What do I hold in my hand?"

"It is an instrument to judge the fineness of cloth, and called a thread counter."

"By Jove!" my spectator said, energetically, "it is marvellous. If I had paid ten francs to see it, I should not begrudge them."

From this moment my room was much to small, and was crowded every evening.

Still, success is not entirely rose-coloured, and I could easily narrate many disagreeable scenes produced by the reputation I had of being a sorcerer; but I will only mention one, which forms a résumé of all I pass over:

A young lady of elegant manners paid me a visit one day, and although her face was hidden by a thick veil, my practised eyes perfectly distinguished her features. She was very pretty.

My incognita would not consent to sit down till she was assured we were alone, and that I was the real Robert-Houdin. I also seated myself, and assuming

the attitude of a man prepared to listen, I bent slightly to my visitor, as if awaiting her pleasure to explain to me the object of her mysterious visit. To my great surprise, the young lady, whose manner betrayed extreme emotion, maintained the most profound silence, and I began to find the visit very strange, and was on the point of forcing an explanation, at any hazard, when the fair unknown timidly ventured these words:

"Good Heavens! sir, I know not how you will interpret my visit."

Here she stopped, and let her eyes sink with a very embarrassed air; then, making a violent effort, she continued:

"What I have to ask of you, sir, is very difficult to explain."

"Speak, madam, I beg," I said, politely, "and I will try to guess what you cannot explain to me."

And I began asking myself what this reserve meant.

"In the first place," the young lady said, in a low voice, and looking round her, "I must tell you confidentially that I loved, my love was returned, and I— I am betrayed."

At the last word the lady raised her head, overcame

the timidity she felt, and said, in a firm and assured voice,

"Yes, sir—yes, I am betrayed, and for that reason I have come to you."

"Really, madam," I said, much surprised at this strange confession, "I do not see how I can help you in such a matter."

"Oh, sir, I entreat you," said my fair visitor, clasping her hands—"I implore you not to abandon me!"

I had great difficulty in keeping my countenance, and yet I felt an extreme curiosity to know the history concealed behind this mystery.

"Calm yourself, madam," I remarked, in a tone of tender sympathy; "tell me what you would of me, and if it be in my power——"

"If it be in your power!" the young lady said, quickly; "why, nothing is more easy, sir."

"Explain yourself, madam."

"Well, sir, I wish to be avenged."

"In what way?"

"How, you know better than I, sir; must I teach you? You have in your power means to——"

"I, madam?"

"Yes, sir, you! for you are a sorcerer, and cannot deny it."

At this word sorcerer, I was much inclined to laugh; but I was restrained by the incognita's evident emotion. Still, wishing to put an end to a scene which was growing ridiculous, I said, in a politely ironical tone:

"Unfortunately, madam, you give me a title I never possessed."

"How, sir!" the young woman exclaimed, in a quick tone, "you will not allow you are——"

"A sorcerer, madam? Oh no, I will not."

"You will not?"

"No, a thousand times no, madam."

At these words my visitor rose hastily, muttered a few incoherent words, appeared suffering from terrible emotion, and then drawing near me with flaming eyes and passionate gestures, repeated:

"Ah, you will not! Very good; I now know what I have to do."

Stupified by such an outbreak, I looked at her fixedly, and began to suspect the cause of her extraordinary conduct.

"There are two modes of acting," she said, with terrible volubility, "towards people who devote themselves to magic arts—entreaty and menaces. You would not yield to the first of these means, hence, I

must employ the second. Stay," she added, "perhaps this will induce you to speak."

And, lifting up her cloak, she laid her hand on the hilt of a dagger passed through her girdle. At the same time she suddenly threw back her veil, and displayed features in which all the signs of rage and madness could be traced. No longer having a doubt as to the person I had to deal with, my first movement was to rise and stand on my guard; but this first feeling overcome, I repented the thought of a struggle with the unhappy woman, and determined on employing a method almost always successful with those deprived of reason. I pretended to accede to her wishes.

"If it be so, madam, I yield to your request. Tell me what you require."

"I have told you, sir; I wish for vengeance, and there is only one method to——"

Here there was a fresh interruption, and the young lady, calmed by my apparent submission, as well as embarrassed by the request she had to make of me, became again timid and confused.

"Well, madam?"

"Well, sir, I know not how to tell you—how to

explain to you—but I fancy there are certain means—certain spells—which render it impossible—impossible for a man to be—unfaithful."

"I now understand what you wish, madam. It is a certain magic practice employed in the middle ages. Nothing is easier, and I will satisfy you."

Decided on playing the farce to the end, I took down the largest book I could find in my library, turned over the leaves, stopped at a page which I pretended to scan with profound attention, and then addressing the lady, who followed all my movements anxiously,

"Madam," I said, confidentially, "the spell I am going to perform renders it necessary for me to know the name of the person; have the kindness, then, to tell it me."

"Julian!" she said, in a faint voice.

With all the gravity of a real sorcerer, I solemnly thrust a pin through a lighted candle, and pronounced some cabalistic words. After which, blowing out the candle, and turning to the poor creature, I said:

"Madam, it is done; your wish is accomplished."

"Oh, thank you, sir," she replied, with the expres-

sion of the profoundest gratitude; and at the same moment she laid a purse on the table and rushed away. I ordered my servant to follow her to her house, and obtain all the information he could about her, and I learned she had been a widow for a short time, and that the loss of an adored husband had disturbed her reason. The next day I visited her relatives, and, returning them the purse, I told them the scene the details of which the reader has just perused.

This scene, with some others that preceded and followed it, compelled me to take measures to guard myself against bores of every description. I could not dream, as formerly, of exiling myself in the country, but I employed a similar resource: this was to shut myself up in my workroom, and organise around me a system of defence against those whom I called, in my ill-temper, thieves of time.

I daily received visits from persons who were utter strangers to me; some were worth knowing, but the majority, gaining an introduction under the most futile pretexts, only came to kill a portion of their leisure time with me. It was necessary to distinguish the tares from the wheat, and this is the arrangement I made:

When one of these gentlemen rang at my door, an electric communication struck a bell in my workroom; I was thus warned and put on my guard. My servant opened the door, and, as is customary, inquired the visitor's name, while I, for my part, laid my ear to a tube, arranged for the purpose, which conveyed to me every word. If, according to his reply, I thought it as well not to receive him, I pressed a button, and a white mark that appeared in a certain part of the hall announced I was not at home to him. My servant then stated I was out, and begged the visitor to apply to the manager.

Sometimes it happened that I erred in my judgment, and regretted having granted an audience; but I had another mode of shortening a bore's visit. I had placed behind the sofa on which I sat an electric spring, communicating with a bell my servant could hear. In case of need, and while talking, I threw my arm carelessly over the back of the sofa, touched the spring, and the bell rang. Then my servant, playing a little farce, opened the front door, rang the bell, which could be heard from the room where I sat, and came to tell me that M. X—— (a name invented for the occasion) wished to speak to me. I ordered M.

X—— to be shown into an adjoining room, and it was very rare that my bore did not raise the siege. No one can form an idea how much time I gained by this happy arrangement, or how many times I blessed my imagination and the celebrated savant to whom the discovery of galvanism is due!

This feeling can be easily explained, for my time was of inestimable value. I husbanded it like a treasure, and never sacrificed it, unless the sacrifice might help me to discover new experiments destined to stimulate public curiosity.

To support my determination in making my researches, I had ever before me this maxim:

IT IS MORE DIFFICULT TO SUPPORT ADMIRATION THAN TO EXCITE IT.

And this other, an apparent corollary of the preceding:

THE FASHION AN ARTISTE ENJOYS CAN ONLY LAST AS LONG AS HIS TALENT DAILY INCREASES.

Nothing increases a professional man's merit so much as the possession of an independent fortune; this truth may be coarse, but it is indubitable. Not only was I convinced of these principles of high economy, but I also knew that a man must strive to profit by the fickle

favour of the public, which equally descends if it does not rise. Hence I worked my reputation as much as I could. In spite of my numerous engagements, I found means to give performances in all the principal theatres, though great difficulties frequently arose, as my performance did not end till half-past ten, and I could only fulfil my other engagements after that hour.

Eleven o'clock was generally the hour fixed for my appearance on a strange stage, and my readers may judge of the speed required to proceed to the theatre in so short a time and make my preparations. It is true that the moments were as well counted as employed, and my curtain had hardly fallen than, rushing towards the stairs, I got before my audience, and jumped into a vehicle that bore me off at full speed.

But this fatigue was as nothing compared to the emotion occasionally produced by an error in the time that was to elapse between my two performances. I remember that, one night, having to wind up the performances at the Vaudeville, the stage-manager miscalculated the time the pieces would take in performing, and found himself much in advance. He sent off an

express to warn me that the curtain had fallen, and I was anxiously expected. Can my readers comprehend my wretchedness? My experiments, of which I could omit none, would occupy another quarter of an hour; but instead of indulging in useless recriminations, I resigned myself and continued my performance, though I was a prey to frightful anxiety. While speaking, I fancied I could hear that cadenced yell of the public to which the famous song, "*Des lampions, des lampions,*" was set. Thus, either through preoccupation, or a desire to end sooner, I found, when my performance was over, that I had gained five minutes out of the quarter of an hour. Assuredly, it might be called the quarter of an hour's grace.

To jump into a carriage and drive to the Place de la Bourse was the affair of an instant; still, twenty minutes had elapsed since the curtain fell, and that was an enormous time. My son Emile and I proceeded up the actors' stairs at full speed, but, on the first step, we had heard the cries, whistling, and stamping of the impatient audience. What a prospect! I knew that frequently, either right or wrong, the public treated an artiste, no matter whom, very harshly, to remind him of punctuality. That sovereign always

appears to have on its lips the words of another monarch: "I was obliged to wait." However, we hurried up the steps leading to the stage.

The stage-manager, who had been watching, on hearing our hurried steps, cried from the landing:

"Is that you, M. Houdin?"

"Yes, sir—yes."

"Raise the curtain!" the same voice shouted.

"Wait, wait, it is imp——"

My breath would not allow me to finish my objection; I fell on a chair, unable to move.

"Come, M. Houdin," the manager said, "*do* go on the stage, the curtain is up, and the public are so impatient."

The door at the back of the stage was open, but I could not pass through it, fatigue and emotion nailed me to the spot. Still, an idea occurred to me, which saved me from the popular wrath.

"Go on to the stage, my boy," I said to my son, "and prepare all that is wanting for the second-sight trick."

The public allowed themselves to be disarmed by this youth, whose face inspired a sympathising interest; and my son, after gravely bowing to the audience,

quietly made his slight preparations, that is to say, he carried an ottoman to the front of the stage, and placed on a neighbouring table a slate, some chalk, a pack of cards, and a bandage.

This slight delay enabled me to recover my breath and calm my nerves, and I advanced in my turn with an attempt to assume the stereotyped smile, in which I signally failed, as I was so agitated. The audience at first remained silent, then their faces gradually unwrinkled, and soon, one or two claps having been ventured, they were carried away and peace was made. I was well rewarded, however, for this terrible ordeal, as my "second sight" never gained a more brilliant triumph.

An incident greatly enlivened the termination of my performance.

A spectator, who had evidently come on purpose to embarrass us, had tried in vain for some minutes to baffle my son's clairvoyance, when, turning to me, he said, laying marked stress on his words:

"As your son is a soothsayer, of course he can guess the number of my stall?"

The importunate spectator doubtlessly hoped to force us into a confession of our impotence, for he covered his number, and the adjacent seats being occupied, it

was apparently impossible to read the numbers. But I was on my guard against all surprises, and my reply was ready. Still, in order to profit as much as possible by the situation, I feigned to draw back.

"You know, sir," I said, feigning an embarrassed air, "that my son is neither sorcerer nor diviner; he reads through my eyes, and hence I have given this experiment the name of second sight. As I cannot see the number of your stall, and the seats close to you are occupied, my son cannot tell it you."

"Ah! I was certain of it," my persecutor said, in triumph, and turning to his neighbours: "I told you I would pin him."

"Oh, sir! you are not generous in your victory," I said, in my turn, in a tone of mockery. "Take care; if you pique my son's vanity too sharply, he may solve your problem, though it is so difficult."

"I defy him," said the spectator, leaning firmly against the back of his seat, to hide the number better —"yes, yes—I defy him!"

"You believe it to be difficult, then?"

"I will grant more: it is impossible."

"Well, then, sir, that is a stronger reason for us to try it. You will not be angry if we triumph in our turn?" I added, with a petulant smile.

"Come, sir; we understand evasions of that sort. I repeat it—I challenge you both."

The public found great amusement in this debate, and patiently awaited its issue.

"Emile," I said to my son, "prove to this gentleman that nothing can escape your second sight."

"It is number sixty-nine," the boy answered, immediately.

Noisy and hearty applause rose from every part of the theatre, in which our opponent joined, for, confessing his defeat, he exclaimed, as he clapped his hands, "It is astounding—magnificent!"

The way I succeeded in finding out the number of the stall was this: I knew beforehand that in all theatres where the stalls are divided down the centre by a passage, the uneven numbers are on the right, and the even on the left. As at the Vaudeville each row was composed of ten stalls, it followed that on the right hand the several rows must begin with one, twenty-one, forty-one, and so on, increasing by twenty each. Guided by this, I had no difficulty in discovering that my opponent was seated in number sixty-nine, representing the fifth stall in the fourth row. I had prolonged the conversation for the double purpose of

giving more brilliancy to my experiment, and gaining time to make my researches. Thus I applied my process of two simultaneous thoughts, to which I have already alluded.

As I am now explaining matters, I may as well tell my readers some of the artifices that added material brilliancy to the second sight. I have already said this experiment was the result of a material communication between myself and my son, which no one could detect. Its combinations enabled us to describe any conceivable object; but, though this was a splendid result, I saw that I should soon encounter unheard-of difficulties in executing it.

The experiment of second sight always formed the termination of my performance. Each evening I saw unbelievers arrive with all sorts of articles to triumph over a secret which they could not unravel. Before going to see Robert-Houdin's son a council was held, in which an object that must embarrass the father was chosen. Among these were half-effaced antique medals, minerals, books printed in characters of every description (living and dead languages), coats of arms, microscopic objects, &c.

But what caused me the greatest difficulty was in

finding out the contents of parcels, often tied with a string, or even sealed up. But I had managed to contend successfully against all these attempts to embarrass me. I opened boxes, purses, pocket-books, &c., with great ease, and unnoticed, while appearing to be engaged on something quite different. Were a sealed parcel offered me, I cut a small slit in the paper with the nail of my left thumb, which I always purposely kept very long and sharp, and thus discovered what it contained. One essential condition was excellent sight, and that I possessed to perfection. I owed it originally to my old trade, and practice daily improved it. An equally indispensable necessity was to know the name of every object offered me. It was not enough to say, for instance, "It is a coin;" but my son must give its technical name, its value, the country in which it was current, and the year in which it was struck. Thus, for instance, if an English crown were handed me, my son was expected to state that it was struck in the reign of George IV., and had an intrinsic value of six francs eighteen centimes.

Aided by an excellent memory, we had managed to classify in our heads the name and value of all foreign money. We could also describe a coat of arms in

heraldic terms. Thus, on the arms of the house of X—— being handed me, my son would reply: "Field gules, with two croziers argent in pale." This knowledge was very useful to us in the *salons* of the Faubourg Saint Germain, where we were frequently summoned.

I had also learned the characters—though unable to translate a word—of an infinity of languages, such as Chinese, Russian, Turkish, Greek, Hebrew, &c. We knew, too, the names of all surgical instruments, so that a surgical pocket-book, however complicated it might be, could not embarrass us. Lastly, I had a very sufficient knowledge of mineralogy, precious stones, antiquities, and curiosities; but I had at my command every possible resource for acquiring these studies, as one of my dearest and best friends, Aristide le Carpentier, a learned antiquary, and uncle of the talented composer of the same name, had, and still has, a cabinet of antique curiosities, which makes the keepers of the imperial museums fierce with envy. My son and I spent many long days in learning here names and dates, of which we afterwards made a learned display. Le Carpentier taught me many things, and, among others, he described various signs by which to recog-

nise old coins when the die is worn off. Thus, a Trajan, a Tiberius, or a Marcus Aurelius became as familiar to me as a five-franc piece.

Owing to my old trade, I could open a watch with ease, and do it with one hand, so as to be able to read the maker's name without the public suspecting it: then I shut up the watch again and the trick was ready; my son managed the rest of the business.

But that power of memory which my son possessed in an eminent degree certainly did us the greatest service. When we went to private houses, he needed only a very rapid inspection, in order to know all the objects in a room, as well as the various ornaments worn by the spectators, such as châtelaines, pins, eye-glasses, fans, brooches, rings, bouquets, &c. He thus could describe these objects with the greatest ease, when I pointed them out to him by our secret communication. Here is an instance:

One evening, at a house in the Chaussée d'Antin, and at the end of a performance which had been as successful as it was loudly applauded, I remembered that, while passing through the next room to the one we were now in, I had begged my son to cast a

glance at a library and remember the titles of some of the books, as well as the order they were arranged in. No one had noticed this rapid examination.

"To end the second sight experiment, sir," I said to the master of the house, "I will prove to you that my son can read through a wall. Will you lend me a book?"

I was naturally conducted to the library in question, which I pretended now to see for the first time, and I laid my finger on a book.

"Emile," I said to my son, "what is the name of this work?"

"It is Buffon," he replied, quickly.

"And the one by its side?" an incredulous spectator hastened to ask.

"On the right or left?" my son asked.

"On the right," the speaker said, having a good reason for choosing this book, for the lettering was very small.

"'The Travels of Anacharsis the Younger,'" the boy replied. "But," he added, "had you asked the name of the book on the left, sir, I should have said Lamartine's Poetry. A little to the right of this row, I see Crébillon's works; below, two volumes of Fleury's

Memoirs;" and my son thus named a dozen books before he stopped.

The spectators had not said a word during this description, as they felt so amazed; but when the experiment had ended, all complimented us by clapping their hands.

CHAPTER II.

Seductions of a Theatrical Agent—How to gain One Hundred Thousand Francs—I start for Brussels—A lucky Two-Sou Piece—Miseries of professional Travelling — The Park Theatre — Tyranny of a Porter—Full House — Small Receipts — Deceptions — Return to Paris.

HAD it not been for my constant toil and the inconveniences attaching to it, I should have been quite happy and satisfied with the daily profit my performances brought me in. But one fine day the demon of seduction presented himself before me in the obsequious form of a theatrical agent.

"Monsieur Robert-Houdin," he said, with a smile on his lips, as if we were old friends, "I am commissioned by M. X——, manager of the royal theatres of Brussels, to offer you an engagement for the summer season."

My first answer was a refusal, which I based on ex-

cellent reasons. As I was very successful, it would not be prudent to break the vein, while I saw no occasion to go a long distance in search of advantages I could secure at home. This reasoning would have settled any one but a theatrical agent; but nothing, it is well known, can shake off the grip of these skilful crimps.

"Permit me, Monsieur Robert-Houdin, not to be quite of your opinion. I allow, of course, that with your talents you are always secure of good receipts, but you should bear in mind that the dog days are approaching, and your room is stifling in summer. This consideration might induce the Parisian public to defer till autumn the pleasure of witnessing your performances, while, by going to Brussels, where the theatres are large and airy, you would have no reason to fear such a result. Come," the plenipotentiary continued, in a most candid tone, "I must tell you, without wishing to flatter you the least in the world, that everybody is talking about you in Belgium; I may add, even, that the manager has been urged to make you offers by a great number of his subscribers."

This flattering insinuation began to shake my

decision, and I offered in my defence reasons whose weakness only attested to my indecision. My clever touter noticed this, and thinking the moment arrived to strike his great blow, said:

"Do you know, sir, the probable proceeds of my offer?"

"No, sir."

"Well, make an estimate."

"It is impossible."

"Then, approximate."

"I must decline; for I understand nothing of such calculations."

"Well, then, I understand them, and am rarely mistaken," said the agent, stroking his chin, "and I tell you it is an affair to you" (here my seducer stopped, as if to make a most accurate calculation)—"an affair of one hundred thousand francs."

"One hundred thousand francs!" I exclaimed, dazzled at such a prospect; "you cannot mean it."

"It is precisely because I mean it that I tell you, and repeat it again: you will clear one hundred thousand francs by your trip. Add to this, the advantage of having seen a splendid country, and being received with all the attention due to an artist of your merit.

You will then return to your impatient spectators, whose curiosity, heightened by their long privation, will produce you receipts far more brilliant than any you might have expected by remaining in Paris."

Being little conversant at that period with theatrical matters, and having no reason to doubt the honesty of my eloquent "humbugger," I easily believed his fine promises. The chink of one hundred thousand francs still ringing in my ears fascinated me; and I gave way unconsciously to the same mode of reasoning the ink-stand inventor had employed.

"And, really," I said to myself, "supposing, for instance, that——" And, leaping from supposition to supposition, my calculations exceeded those of the agent. But, in order to be reasonable, I concluded, like my friend the inventor, in this way: "Well, to prevent any misunderstanding, suppose we say only fifty thousand francs—surely nobody can accuse me with exaggeration."

Though dazzled by this brilliant calculation, I strove to conceal my desire of accepting the offer.

"It is all very well," I said, in my turn, after the style of a perfect man of business, "but what are the conditions?"

"Oh, most simple!" the crafty fellow said; "the same as are made with all distinguished artists. Monsieur X—— will pay all the expenses, but to cover those, he will deduct three hundred francs from the gross receipts, exclusive of the claim of the poor, and the rest will be fairly divided between him and yourself."

"Still, I should like to know how much the sum to be divided will amount to?"

"How is it possible to say?" the agent exclaimed, with an aspect of the greatest sincerity. "With such success as awaits you, it will be enormous."

In spite of my pressing, the agent always entrenched himself in his exclamations, and the impossibility of making such an estimate. Tired of the struggle, I at length formed my decision.

"I will go to Brussels," I said, in a resolute tone.

The theatrical agent immediately drew from his pocket a printed form, which he had brought in case of our coming to terms, and we had only to add the stipulations to it.

"Tell me, sir," the manager's representative said, in a conscientious tone, "will you have any objection to

a forfeit of six thousand francs? As the engagement is reciprocal, you must find this but fair."

I only saw in the agent's request a very natural desire to defend his employer's interests; and I drew this conclusion from it: if the agreement was advantageous for the manager, it must be equally so for me, as we were to share the receipts. I consented to the clause, and affixed my signature. The agent could not repress his satisfaction, but he cleverly ascribed it to the interest he felt in me.

"I congratulate you sincerely on the engagement you have just made," he said, as he offered me his hand; "you will soon be able to tell me of the results you will draw from it. By the way," he added, in a friendly tone, after a pause, "will you now permit me to give you a piece of advice?"

"Certainly, sir—certainly."

"I would recommend you, then, to take a collection of showy bills and posters with you to Belgium. They do not know how to get them up in Brussels, and they will produce a prodigious effect. It would be also as well to have a handsome lithograph, representing your stage; it can be put up in the various picture-shops, and you will obtain increased publicity."

These counsels, and the familiar, almost protecting, tone in which they were given, appeared to me strange; and I could not refrain from expressing my surprise to the man of business.

"What need of all these precautions? I fancied I understood you that——"

"Good gracious me! all professionals are alike," the giver of advice interrupted me; "absorbed in their art, they understand nothing of business. But, tell me, Monsieur Robert-Houdin, would you feel annoyed at netting one hundred and fifty thousand francs, instead of the one hundred thousand I promised you?"

"On my word, no," I said, with a smile; "and I confess that, far from feeling vexed, I should be very pleased at it."

"Well, then, the more you make yourself known, the more you will add to the amount I stated."

"But I thought that notoriety was generally the business of managers."

"Certainly, ordinary publicity, but not extraordinary. You must see that is unlikely, as it will be all for your advantage."

Though little conversant with business, as the agent had just remarked, I saw that his arguments were not always in accordance with logic. However, I con-

sented to the posters and the lithograph, in consideration of the promised results.

"That is right," the agent said, his familiarity sensibly increasing since the signature of the contract —"that is right: that is what I call managing things properly."

And my man left me, after complimenting me once more on the arrangement I had made.

When left to myself, I indulged at my ease in day-dreams about the magnificent result promised me, and this anticipated joy was probably all I tasted from the moment of signing this engagement to its termination. The first unpleasantness it occasioned me was a slight discussion with my cashier, that is to say, my wife, who, in consideration of her employment, had a deliberative voice in all theatrical matters. I could not certainly have found an employé of greater probity, or a more devoted clerk, but I am bound to say that this clerk, probably through her intimate connexion with her employer, sometimes ventured to contradict him. Thus I fared when I described to that functionary the brilliant perspective of my agreement.

Although I finished my statement with this har-

monious phrase, on every word of which I laid a heavy stress, in order to give it more value, "and we shall return to France with one—hundred—thousand —francs clear profit," my wife, or rather my cashier, coolly said to me:

"Well, in your place, I should not have made such a bargain."

"But why not?" I said, piqued by this unexpected opposition.

"Why? because nothing guarantees you the promised profits, while you are perfectly certain as to your expenses."

Wishing to cut short a discussion from which I did not see my way out with honour:

"Women are all alike," I said, employing the phrase of the theatrical agent; "understanding nothing of business, they oppose one out of obstinacy. But," I added, tossing my head, "we shall soon see which of us is in the right."

I confess that in this instance I allowed myself too easily to be led astray by flattering illusions; but I must add, that it was for the last time; for, thenceforth, I was so sceptical as regarded calculations, that my modest expectations always remained below the reality.

The period for starting soon arrived, and we made our preparations with incredible activity, for I desired to lose as little time as possible between the closing of my performances at Paris and their commencement in Brussels.

The Great Northern line not being open at that period, I was obliged to content myself with a post-chaise. Consequently, I hired from a builder of public conveyances, for two hundred francs a month, a diligence which had formerly been used in the environs of Paris; it was composed of a coupé and a vast rotonde, over which was an impériale for the luggage. On the 25th of May, the day fixed for our departure, my carriage was loaded with an immense number of chests, containing my apparatus, and after we had taken our places, the postilion's whip cracked, and we started.

We took with us on this trip, besides my two boys who performed with me, a manager, a workman, also acting as servant, and my wife's mother, who came partly for pleasure, and partly to help her daughter in her theatrical details. Galloping through Paris, we soon left the Faubourg and the Barrière St. Denis behind us. The weather was splendid—a perfect spring

evening; my wife and I, with the children, were comfortably established in the coupé, and as it was Madame Robert-Houdin's first journey, she was so delighted with it, that I believe, if I had then offered her the calculation of my presumed profits, she would probably have herself augmented it. For my own part, I was plunged in a delicious reverie. I recalled my journey with Torrini, and while giving a thought of regret to that excellent friend, I compared his carriage with my brilliant equipage, his modest claims on fortune with the magnificent prospects promised me; and I could not help yielding to a feeling of noble pride when I remembered I owed this position solely to my labour and to my energy. Then, finding myself freed from the annoyance of any theatrical administration, and my inventive ideas abandoned, I experienced an undefinable comfort, and were it not for the fear of making a pun, I would add, at this moment I was really transported.

What would I have given to see myself thus bowling along in my own carriage! I fancied that the very passers-by regarded us with a certain degree of satisfaction; and in this infantile illusion I smiled upon them most benignantly.

At some distance from the barrier we stopped.

"Will you please to get out and have your carriage weighed? Here is the office."

"Before proceeding to weigh," the receiver of the toll said, approaching me, "I warn you that I shall summons you for carrying a heavier weight than the law allows."

I could not appeal to my ignorance of this, for no one ought to be ignorant of the law; I therefore submitted philosophically enough to the threatened summons, and we soon recommenced our journey, laughing heartily at the incident. The shades of night began to cover the country when we reached the environs of Senlis. An old beggar, seeing us approaching, held out his hat; I understood this expressive gesture, and had the satisfaction of doing a clever trick and a good action at the same time; for I threw out a penny, which fell in his hat.

I had hardly executed this adroit manœuvre, when cries of "Stop! stop!" reached my ear; and at the same time I saw the old man running panting after the carriage, and shouting. The postilion at length stopped the horses, and he was just in time—a few paces further on, and our heavy carriage would have

been upset. The worthy beggar had perceived that one of our wheels was on the point of losing its tire, and as the old man in his haste had lost his coin, and was beginning to look for it, I spared him this trouble by giving him a five-franc piece.

How true it is that an act of kindness is never lost: to a simple penny we owed our escape from an accident, the consequences of which would have been incalculable. A neighbouring cartwright soon came up and told us it was necessary to have the two wheels of the carriage repaired; and he gave us the following explanation of the accident that had occurred:

The diligence had been standing for a long time in a damp coach-house, and the felloes had swollen. The heat produced by our rapid locomotion had dried them, and they had caught fire under the tire. The operation lasted four hours, and cost me forty francs; this was, perhaps, twenty more than it was worth, but what could I do but pay, as I should have lost precious time by appealing to the law?

I was beginning to understand that travelling impressions in a diligence are not at all of a nature to enrich a traveller; but the reflection came too late, and I could only continue my journey. I, therefore, did

so, not very gaily, perhaps, but at any rate with a degree of careless resignation.

I will pass over the details of a thousand petty miseries we had to undergo, like so many pin-pricks echeloned on our passage to prepare us for more bitter deceptions. We at length reached Quiévrain, the frontier town of Belgium, where we were to give up our horses and put our carriage on the railway running to Brussels; beforehand, however, we had to endure the formalities of the custom-house.

I hoped, as the theatrical agent had informed me, to pass all my traps summarily, by declaring the nature of my apparatus, and hence I went to the office and made my declaration.

"There is only one way of passing your luggage, sir," a clerk said to me, very politely. (Belgian officials are generally very gentle and civil—at least, I always found them so.)

"Then," I replied, in the same tone, "will you have the kindness, sir, to tell me the way, that I may profit by it as speedily as possible?"

"You must unpack your instruments, put an *ad valorem* duty on them, which the comptroller will verify, and pay 25 per cent. on the amount, after which you can start as soon as you please."

"But, sir, that is not possible," I said, greatly annoyed at this *contretemps*.

"And why not?"

"Because my instruments are not merchandise."

I then explained to my clerk that I was going to Brussels to give some performances, after which I intended to return to France with the same luggage. According to the information the official gave me, it seems I had neglected to fulfil a simple formality, through the want of which the office at Quiévrain would not let me go on without payment. To pass my instruments duty free, I ought to have applied to the Belgian Minister, who would willingly have granted me the permission. I could certainly do so still, but I could not receive an answer under a week, and that was just three days after the period fixed for my commencing at Brussels.

Hence I found myself between the horns of a dilemma. I must either, after paying a heavy duty, lose precious time in packing, valuing, and unpacking my instruments, or forfeit six thousand francs to my manager while awaiting a ministerial reply. Although I made all sorts of supplications to the different customs officials, I could only obtain this

answer, dictated by their inflexible orders, "We can do nothing."

I was in despair; in vain, conforming to the maxim, "It is better to address the king than his officials," I pursued the director himself with my entreaties; he would not hear a word. He was a stout, good-looking man, of some fifty years of age, dressed in an enormous paletot, much resembling in cut the one I have described as my costume when learning my sleight-of-hand tricks at Tours.

We were both standing at the door of the custom-house, near the high road, where my chests had been deposited. Wearied with listening to my eternal remonstrances, the director began talking to me about indifferent matters; but I always led the conversation back to the same subject.

"You are a prestidigitator, then?" my stout Belgian said to me, laying a stress on this word, to prove to me that he knew the pompous title by which the juggler is distinguished.

"Yes, sir, that is my profession."

"Ah, ah! very good; I know several celebrities in that art. I have even witnessed their performances with a great deal of pleasure."

While my amateur was thus talking, an idea occurred to me, which I immediately put in execution, for I trusted the result of it would powerfully aid in favouring my entreaties.

"What are your most striking tricks?" the stout man added, in the tone of a perfect connoisseur.

"I really cannot describe them to you, it would be too difficult. There is one which can only be appreciated when seen; but I can easily give you a specimen."

"I should much like it, if you would," the official said, not sorry thus to console himself for the trouble I had caused him. My son, at this moment, was playing some distance off on the high road, and kicking a pebble about.

"Emile!" I cried, hailing him, "can you tell us what this gentleman has in his pocket?"

"Certainly!" the boy replied, without leaving off his game; "he has a blue-striped handkerchief."

"Oh, oh!" the stout gentleman said, with an air of astonishment. Then he recovered, and putting his hands in both pockets to conceal their contents,

"That's all very good!" he added, with an air of doubt; "but chance may have aided that discovery."

After a slight pause, during which he seemed considerably bothered, he continued:

"Can he tell me, though, what is under the handkerchief?"

"The gentleman asks what is under the handkerchief?" I shouted to my son.

"There is," he replied, in the same loud voice, "a green morocco spectacle case, without the spectacles."

"That's really curious—very curious!" said the man of the paletot. "But," he added, shrugging his shoulders, "I should much like him to mention the article under the spectacle case."

And my incredulous friend shoved his hands in his pockets. I drew a good omen from this last exclamation, and so, desirous to ensure my success, I took my precautions that my son should answer correctly, and I transmitted him the question just asked me.

Emile, who had not left off his game for a moment, exclaimed, as if anxious to get rid of us, "It is a piece of sugar which the gentleman saved from his cup of coffee."

"Ah! that is too fine!" the director exclaimed, in a tone of admiration; "the lad is a sorcerer."

My second-sight performance was at an end; still I

saw with pleasure that it produced a lively impression on the director of the customs, who, after some moments' reflection, himself returned to the subject we had left.

"Come, sir," he remarked, "I will infringe my regulations for your sake. We will not open your chests; I will rely on your statement of their contents and value, and you will pay the duty according to the tariff. When you have reached Brussels, and have obtained the ministerial authority to introduce your instruments duty free, I will return you the money you have paid."

I thanked my new protector, and, a few hours later, personnel and luggage had reached the station at Brussels.

Before leaving Quiévrain for ever, I will give my reader an idea of the conjuring trick which enabled me to produce those startling instances of second sight to which I owed my deliverance.

I have already said that the director wore a paletot, with large pockets, so, profiting by the art by which I had so cleverly emptied Comte's pockets some time before, I found out what he had in them, and my son consequently learned it from me. As for the piece

of sugar, it was easy enough to perceive by its regular shape that it had come from a café—besides, I could have no doubt that a lump of sugar, taken from the pocket of a man of fifty, and, above all, a Belgian, must be saved from his after-dinner coffee.

At the Brussels station, a postilion who had three horses out of work, offered to take our heavy carriage to the Tirlemont Hotel, and I consented, for I really knew not what hotel to go to. After driving through the city at full speed, we entered a winding street, in the midst of which our driver began smacking his whip loudly to announce our arrival, and with the skill of a practised driver, he turned into an archway that opened on to the hotel yard. We made a princely entrée here, which reminded me of our departure from Paris, for the master of the hotel, his wife, and the servants, were all at their posts ready to receive us worthily. We had gone safely through about half the narrow entry, when our vehicle suddenly stopped, as if riveted to the pavement: blows fell like hail on the unhappy steeds, but these, though accompanied by vigorous oaths and stimulants of every description, could not conquer the unknown obstacle.

Being quite convinced that the road was clear on either side, our postilion decided on trying a final effort: so he got down rapidly from his seat, took the horses by the bit, and drew them forward sharply. The carriage appeared to yield to this powerful attraction, and began to move slowly. All at once a sound of breaking was heard, while at the same moment cries of alarm issued from both compartments of the carriage.

The doors were hurriedly opened, women and children emerged, and the last of our party was still on the step, when the impériale gave way, and the numerous heavy trunks crashed into the centre of the carriage. In the emotion produced by such danger, I looked round my party, and, thanks to Heaven, we were all safe and sound.

My wife and children were carefully attended to, while I, though not entirely recovered from my terror, sought the cause of this unforeseen catastrophe. I soon discovered that our carriage, being too highly loaded, had caught in the projecting sides of the archway, and that this gradual and powerful pressure had forced the mouldering framework of our old vehicle to give way.

In comparison with the misfortune from which we had so miraculously escaped, the injury to the carriage was an accident of no importance—a loss which would be quickly forgotten in the success that awaited us. The carriage was sent to be repaired, and the accident was soon a thing of the past, as we sought to recover from the fatigue of our long and wearying journey.

My first walk in Brussels led me straight to the manager, who appeared delighted at my keeping my word, and gave me a most polite reception: thence, I proceeded to the Park Theatre, where I was to give my performances.

This building, lately destroyed by fire, was situated on one of the most agreeable sites in the city, for it formed the angle of a magnificent park, which is to Brussels what the Tuileries are to Paris.

During the summer no theatrical performance took place, and it was to fill up this gap that the engagement had been formed with me.

This theatre was city property, and I learned the fact in the following way. The porter, whom the manager ought to have recommended to give me all necessary information, stated to me that he was at-

tached to the theatre, both as keeper and head machinist. He also told me, with pedantic gravity, that I could not drive in a nail, form an opening in the stage, or, in a word, make the slightest change, until he, as responsible official, had referred the point to the city architect.

"Such supervision is not possible," I said to this important personage. "How do you manage, then, when the theatrical performances are on?"

"Ah, that is different. As the architect places confidence in me, he allows me to do whatever I think proper, and I am responsible for everything."

"If that is all, I can take the responsibility on myself, and the matter can be settled at once."

"If you think so," the porter replied, in an ironical tone, "you can apply to the city authorities: the council will take it into consideration, and you will receive permission in a fortnight."

I saw that the crafty gentleman wished to force himself upon me, but I soon destroyed his hopes by making him understand I would allow no stranger to be initiated into my mysterious arrangements.

This conversation had taken place on the stage, by the light of a candle which the conservator of the

royal theatre held in his hand, but so soon as I had intimated my intention of doing without him, he turned on his heel and retired to his den, leaving us in perfect darkness.

"Wait a moment, sir," I cried to him; "we cannot be groping about in this way; so, open the windows."

"Windows!" the machinist said, with a laugh; "who ever heard of windows in a theatre? What use would they be when the rehearsals always take place by candlelight?"

"Excellently reasoned, my worthy man," I replied, checking my inclination to laugh; "I always thought like you that windows could be done without if you had lights, but when you have no lights——"

"Why, then, you do as I do, you go money in hand to the grocer's and buy candles; I see no difficulty in that."

And, while making this reply, the porter and his candle were gradually eclipsed. I had no time to lose in arguing, and besides, this man, whom I would have gladly brought to his senses under other circumstances, might play me some trick that might prevent me performing *mine*. My instruments would remain,

so to speak, at his mercy during the night, and he would have all possible facility to do me some injury, which he could deny in safety. Hence, I sent my servant straight to the grocer's, that natural providence of any one who wants a light.

All my readers have probably read descriptions of theatrical interiors, and they are all much alike, although their cleanliness and arrangement vary according to the intelligence of the stage-manager. Nor is the same luxury of decorations and accessories visible in all theatres; some are literally encumbered with them, while others are almost entirely wanting in these qualities.

I remember that, when giving a dozen performances at Chester, I found the theatrical decorations charmingly original. Properly speaking, there was only one scene; but, as it would have been impossible to produce the scenic effect with this, the machinist had very cleverly painted a forest on the back, and the scene moved on a pivot, which my friend turned by the aid of a winch, and thus could display a hall or a forest at will.

With such feeble resources, the scenic illusion was often compromised, but, according to the machinist,

the actors corrected any glaring anachronisms of place by ingenious new readings, and sometimes, too, by the *expression of their faces.*

This machinist was like his scenery, for he filled many parts; he was in turn porter, painter, wig-maker, property man, tailor, and ticket-taker; but with so many strings to his bow this worthy man found himself out of work during three parts of the year, for during that period there were no performances at Chester.

But to return to the porter, machinist, and keeper of the Park Theatre. This man could never forgive my refusal of his services, and his impertinence and ill-will pursued me to the close, and occasioned me continual annoyance; and although I complained to the manager, I could obtain no redress. The porter, being paid by government, claimed the right, like his brethren the porters of Paris, of making his tenants feel his power and his independence.

I have performed in many royal theatres, but I never had to deal with any but most polite machinists and managers, who could flatter themselves they were masters in their own house.

However, I managed to surmount difficulties of every

description, and the day of my first representation arrived.

On this very day was opened that fiery furnace which was called "the summer of 1846;" and the heat was astounding. Still, the theatre was full, and the success of my experiments was as great as I could desire. The second sight, especially, produced an enthusiasm which the generally cold inhabitants of Brussels expressed by noisy bravos.

I was proud and happy, for, in addition to the satisfaction success always produces, I foresaw the realisation of the theatrical agent's brilliant promises. Thus, to take a slight revenge for my cashier's obstinacy, I never failed, each time I left the stage, to say to her in a tone of triumph:

"Well! do you believe in the one hundred thousand francs now? That's how I like business."

And I returned on the stage with a smiling and animated face.

The performance over, the curtain fell on the illusions I had produced, as well as on those I had nursed as to my receipts. They were equally ephemeral in either case, for I had scarcely left the stage when I saw my manager coming towards me in the attitude once

assumed by the steeds of Hippolytus, according to Theramene's recital. He, so joyous at the commencement of the performance,

> L'œil morne maintenant et la tête baissée,
> Semblait se conformer à sa triste pensée.

"Here, sir," he said, pointing to a small rouleau, "is your share."

"What! my share?" I exclaimed, in a tone of indescribable disappointment; "and the rest?"

"The rest, sir, has gone in the expenses, and the poor-rate."

"But the rest," I still insisted—"the rest, what has become of it?"

"Well, sir," my manager replied, in a lamentable tone, "the cashier states that the greater part of the audience received free admissions."

Irritated by such an explanation, I hurried to the office, and opened and closed the door violently. The employé turned towards me, and without being affected by my abruptness, he bowed to me politely (another instance of Belgian courtesy).

"How is it," I said, without replying to his bow, "that so many free admissions were given without my sanction?"

"They were given, sir, by the manager's orders," the man replied, with a calmness that made me believe he was used to such scenes, "and you must be aware," he added, in a conciliatory tone, "that there are numerous claims on the first night of a new performance at a royal theatre. Thus we have, for instance, the authorities, the city architect, the manager of the gas company, the newspaper writers, the manager's relations and friends, the police inspector, who has a right to a box; and all these gentlemen, as you may suppose, bring their families with them. We have, again——"

"Oh, sir," I replied, ironically, "for goodness' sake, stop, for if you go on at that rate I shall begin to fear you had not a seat left for the paying public. To-morrow, I presume, I shall have to hand you back the modest sum you have just sent me. However, I shall certainly insist on an explanation with the manager."

The next day I proceeded to call on M. X——, with the firm intention of evincing to him my dissatisfaction; but he was so ready with his explanations that I could not be angry, and we ended by agreeing that, henceforth, all free admissions should

have my signature, and that they should not be dispensed quite so liberally.

This measure, perhaps, checked some new abuses, but was not enough to suppress them all, for though the theatre grew more and more crowded, my strong-box did not follow the same progression.

Far from netting the fabulous sum which had so dazzled me, I only brought back from my trip to Brussels an illusion dispelled and experience, while, as my cashier had predicted, my expenses rather more than balanced my receipts.

I have great reason for believing that, during my stay at the Park Theatre, I was cheated out of my proper share. It was my first affair of the kind, and I was obliged to study at my own expense; but, from that period, I was on my guard, and evaded every attempt at fraud. I will add, too, that at a later date I had the satisfaction of dealing only with managers of well-known probity, to whom I gave my entire confidence without ever having any reason to regret it.

CHAPTER III.

Reopening of my Fantastic Soirées—Minor Miseries of Good Luck—Inconvenience of a small Theatre—My Room taken by Storm—A gratuitous Performance—A conscientious Audience—Pleasant Story about a Black Silk Cap—I perform at the Château of St. Cloud—Cagliostro's Casket—Holidays.

THE recommencement of the performances on my own stage largely recompensed me for my bitter *impressions de voyage*. My room was taken a week beforehand for my first performance, as well as for the following, and I had to send away four times as many persons as I could receive.

This success had been foreseen by the theatrical agent, and I owed it as much to my absence from the capital as to the attraction my experiments held out. My repertory was still a novelty to the Parisian public, as I had started for Brussels at the height of my success. This did not prevent me, however, from

offering some new tricks, one of which more especially produced a striking effect.

After my son had mounted on a very small table, I covered him with an enormous stuff cone, which concealed him from sight, and then, at the sound of a pistol, the cone was thrown over, and at the same instant the lad appeared at my side. Afterwards, in large theatres, and specially in London, this trick was improved upon, and seemed more marvellous still. Instead of appearing by my side, the boy was instantaneously transported to a box at a long distance from the stage, where everybody could easily see him.

It is a well-known fact that a man cannot enjoy perfect happiness in this world, and that the greatest prosperity has its disagreeable side; this is what is called "the minor evils of good luck." One of my special annoyances was having a room much too small, which disabled me from satisfying all the demands made for places, and, though I racked my brain, I could hit on no expedient to remedy this inconvenience.

As I have already said, my room was often taken beforehand; in that case the office was not opened, and a placard on the door announced it was useless for any

non-holders of tickets to apply. But it daily happened that persons, annoyed at being unable to enjoy a promised treat, took no heed of the notice and went straight to the pay place. On being refused admission, they abused the money-taker, and still more the management.

These complaints were generally absurd, and of the following description:

"Such an abuse is most improper," one of these disappointed persons said, with great simplicity; "I will certainly go to-morrow and complain to the prefect of police, and we shall see whether Monsieur Robert-Houdin has a right to have too small a theatre.'

When these recriminations went no further, I confess I laughed at them, but they did not always end in such a pacific manner. My employés were sometimes personally attacked, and on one occasion my theatre was taken by storm. The story is worth telling:

One evening a dozen young men, after heating their brains by an excellent dinner, presented themselves at the door of my theatre; the notice they read only appeared to them an excellent jest. Consequently, paying no attention to the observations made to them,

they collected round the door, and, to employ the usual expression in such cases, they began to form "the head of the tail." Other visitors, encouraged by their example, collected, and gradually a considerable crowd assembled in front of the theatre.

The manager, informed of what was happening, came forward, and prepared to address the crowd from the head of the stairs, after coughing to render his voice clearer. But he had scarce commenced his address, when his voice was drowned by derisive laughter and shouts, which compelled his silence. In his despair, he came to tell me the dilemma, and ask what he had better do.

"Do not disturb yourself," I said; "all will end better than you expect. Stay," I added, looking at my watch; "it is now half-past seven, and the ticket-holders will begin to arrive; so, open the doors, and, as soon as the room is full, the public outside will be compelled to abandon the ground."

I had scarcely uttered the words, when a servant came in all haste to tell me that the crowd had broken down the barrier, and rushed into the room. I hastened on to the stage, and, through the hole in the curtain, could assure myself of the truth of the statement: the room was full.

I confess I was much embarrassed as to what I should do. To have the room cleared by the neighbouring guard was a scandal I wished to avoid, and I could not calculate the consequences. Besides, if the police interfered, I should have to attend at the court, and thus lose precious time. Lastly, the Prefecture, which had hitherto imposed but a single sentry on me, would not fail to send a corporal's guard, at least, to the great increase of my daily expenses.

I immediately formed a decision.

"Have the doors closed," I said to my manager, "and put up a notice that, owing to a sudden indisposition, the evening's performance is postponed till to-morrow. As this measure applies to the ticket-holders, be in readiness to return the money to those who will not exchange their tickets. As for me," I continued, "I have made up my mind. I will give a gratis performance, and my revenge will consist in compelling the public to be ashamed of the schoolboy trick they have played."

This plan arranged, I prepared to do the honours of my house properly, and the curtain soon rose.

When I appeared on the stage, I noticed that the greater number of the spectators evinced considerable

embarrassment; still, I soon put them at their ease by the nonchalant air I assumed, as if ignorant of what had occurred. I did even more. I performed with an unusual amount of dash; and when the time arrived to offer my small presents, I was so liberal with them that not a single spectator was overlooked.

I need not say that I was heartily applauded. The public vied with me in "reciprocating" compliments, and thus hoped to compensate me for the annoyance they fancied they had caused me.

An original and extremely comic scene was performed when my audience lingeringly departed.

Nearly all the persons present had only seen in this assault on my room a means to obtain places, and each intended to pay for his seat after having occupied it.

But, for my part, I determined on maintaining the original character of my gratuitous performance, even if my pocket suffered. Thus, foreseeing this feeling of delicacy, I had ordered all my attendants to leave before the performance was over, and they had obeyed me so well, that manager, money-taker, and box-openers had disappeared.

I then posted myself where I could see everything

without being noticed. The spectators looked for the office; searched all around to find some official; thrust their hands in their pockets, and collected in small groups, until, worn out, they went away.

Still, the public would not allow themselves to be beaten, and for several days I had a regular procession of people coming to pay their debt. Some persons added their apologies, and I also received by post a note for 100 fr., with the following letter:

"Sir,—Having been dragged into your room last night by a party of thoughtless young men, I tried in vain, after the performance, to pay for the seat I had occupied.

"I do not wish, however, to quit France without paying the debt I have contracted. In consequence, estimating the price of my stall by the pleasure you caused me, I send you a hundred-franc note, which I beg you to accept in payment of the debt I involuntarily contracted.

"Still, I should not consider myself out of your debt were I not also to offer you my compliments for your interesting performance, and beg you to accept, sir, the assurance of my consideration."

As the loss entailed on me by the assault on my room was light, I had no cause to repent the decision I had formed. On the other hand, the adventure became known, and added still more to my credit, as it is notorious the public prefer going to theatres where they are certain of finding no room.

As a general rule, family parties came to see me, but it was not unusual for a number of persons to form a rendezvous at my theatre. The following incident will offer an instance:

The ingenious author of those eccentric caricatures, which delight everybody who is not himself attacked, Dantan the younger, came one day to my box-office.

"Madam," he said to the lady in command, "how many stalls have you to let?"

"I will consult my book," the lady replied. "Do you wish them for to-night?"

"No, madam, for this day week."

"Oh, in that case, you can have as many as you like."

"How, as many as I like? Why, your room must be made of india-rubber?"

"No, sir, I merely mean to say that of fifty stalls I

have at my disposal, you can take as many as you please."

"Very good, madam, I now understand," Dantan continued, laughingly; "then, if I can have as many as I please, have the goodness to keep me sixty."

The lady, much embarrassed to solve this problem, sent for me, and I easily arranged the affair by converting the first pit row into stalls.

The reason why the sculptor required so many seats was as follows:

Dantan, junior, has an enormous number of friends, and the original idea had occurred to him of inviting a certain number of them to Robert-Houdin's perform ance, and for that purpose he had engaged these sixty seats.

I have mentioned this incident, because it both proves the renown my theatre enjoyed at that time, and reminds me of the commencement of one of the most agreeable acquaintances I ever made in my life. From this moment I became, and have always remained, one of the intimate friends of the celebrated sculptor.

Before knowing him personally, like the majority o his admirers, I was unacquainted with his serious

works, but when I was admitted to his studio, I could appreciate the full extent of his talent.

Dantan has in this room, arranged on enormous shelves, the most perfect collection of busts of contemporary celebrities. I do not think a single illustrious person of the age is missing. Each is properly classified and arranged as in a museum; monarchs and statesmen, less numerous than the others, are collected on one shelf; then come authors, musicians, singers, composers, physicians, warriors, dramatic artists—in a word, great men of every description and country. But the most interesting thing in the gallery is that every bust is accompanied by its caricature, so that, after admiring the original, you laugh heartily at noticing all the comic details of the other.

On seeing these numberless heads, it is difficult to imagine that one man's life could suffice for such a toil. Dantan, however, has a remarkable talent in catching the characteristic features of a face, and often enough he need only see a person once in order to produce an extraordinary likeness. Witness the following fact, which I will cite as much for its singularity as because it bears an affinity, in some degree, to sleight of hand:

The son of Lieutenant-General Baron D—— came one day to Dantan, begging him to make a bust of his father. "I will not hide from you," he said to the artist, "that you will encounter an almost insurmountable difficulty in performing your task. Not only would the general never consent to sit to you, but you cannot even be introduced to him at home. As my father has been ill for many years, he sees no other persons than his servants, and he keeps almost always alone. Hence, you will have to manage to catch a glimpse at him unawares, but I do not know how."

"Does your father never go out?" the sculptor asked.

"Oh yes, sir; every afternoon at four my father takes the 'bus and goes to read the papers at a room in the Place de la Madeleine, after which he comes back and shuts himself up again."

"I require no more," the artist said. "I will begin making my observations to-day, and set to work to-morrow."

In fact, at four o'clock precisely, Dantan posted himself before a house forming the corner of the Boulevards and the Rue Louis-le-Grand, and soon saw the general come out and walk to an omnibus. The

sculptor followed his model and entered the vehicle with him, but, unfortunately, the only two seats vacant were on the same side, and the artist could only make profile studies, being very careful not to attract attention.

At last the 'bus stopped before the Madeleine church; pursuer and pursued went in together to the same reading-room, where each took up his favourite paper, and was soon lost in the perusal.

Dantan had taken a seat opposite the general, and, while apparently absorbed in a leader, took stealthy glances at his model.

All was going on favourably, and the artist continued his studies quietly for some moments, until the general, already surprised that his fellow-passenger should come to the same reading-room, caught his eye fixed upon himself.

Annoyed by this impertinent curiosity, for which he could assign no reason, he attempted to foil it by forming a rampart of his enormous paper.

The face of the old baron disappeared, but the top of his head was still visible, and Dantan would have been able to continue his task satisfactorily, had it not been for a frightful silk cap he wore.

Many a conjuror, even the most famous, would have been checked by such a difficulty; but Dantan did not long rack his brains, which renders his trick only the more striking.

He went up to the lady at the counter, spoke with her for a few moments, and then quietly returned to his post of observation.

It is necessary to state that the reading-room, heated by a large stove, was already quite warm enough; but suddenly an insupportable degree of heat filled the room, and drops of perspiration stood on the foreheads of several persons.

The general, who at this moment held the *Gazette des Tribunaux* in his hand, and was doubtlessly amusing himself with some lugubrious drama, was one of the last to notice the heightened temperature. Even he, though, at length found it necessary to remove his silk cap, and put it in his pocket, growling, "Confound it, how hot the room is!"

The trick was done.

The reader has already guessed that the clever sculptor was the cause of this vapour-bath, which he induced the lady to produce by explaining to her his important mission.

This result once obtained, Dantan hastily made his phrenological studies on the venerable head of the old warrior; then, rising from the table, he cast a final glance over his features, photographed him, so to speak, in his mind, and ran off to set to work.

A short time after, the sculptor sent the general's family the most perfect bust possibly ever produced by his chisel.

Here I will close the parenthesis I commenced with reference to the evils the smallness of my theatre entailed on me; and I will now begin another about the pleasures my success procured me.

At the beginning of November, I received a "command" to St. Cloud, to give a performance before Louis Philippe and his family. I accepted the invitation with the greatest pleasure; for as I had never yet performed before a crowned head, this was an important event for me.

I had six days before me to make my preparations, and I took all possible pains, even arranging a trick for the occasion, from which I had reason to expect an excellent result.

On the day fixed for my performance, a fourgon came at an early hour to fetch me and my apparatus,

and we were conveyed to the château. A theatre had been put up in a large hall selected by the king for the representation, and in order that I might not be disturbed in my preparations, a guard was placed at one of the doors leading into the corridor. I also noticed three other doors in this apartment; one, composed of glass, opened on to the garden opposite a passage filled with splendid orange-trees; the two others, to the right and left, communicated with the apartments of the king and the Duchess of Orleans.

I was busy arranging my apparatus, when I heard one of the doors I have just mentioned open quietly, and directly a voice made the following inquiry in the most affable manner:

"Monsieur Robert-Houdin, may I be permitted to come in?"

I turned my head in the direction, and recognised the king, who, having asked this question merely as a form of introduction, had not waited for my reply to walk towards me.

I bowed respectfully.

"Have you all you require for your preparations?" the king asked me.

"Yes, sire; the steward of the château supplied me

with skilled workmen, who speedily put up this little stage."

My tables, consoles, and tabourets, as well as the various instruments for my performance, symmetrically arranged on the stage, already presented an elegant appearance.

"This is all very pretty," the king said to me, drawing near the stage, and casting a stealthy glance on some of my apparatus; "I see with pleasure that the artist of 1846 will justify the good opinion produced by the mechanician of 1844."

"Sire," I replied, "on this day I will strive, as I did two years ago, to render myself worthy of the great favour your majesty deigns to bestow on me, by witnessing my performance."

"Your son's second sight is said to be very surprising," the king continued; "but I warn you, Monsieur Robert-Houdin, to be on your guard, for we intend to cause you considerable difficulties."

"Sire," I replied, boldly, "I have every reason for believing that my son will surmount them."

"I should be vexed were it otherwise," the king said, with a tinge of incredulity, as he retired. "Monsieur Robert-Houdin," he added, as he closed

the door after him, "I shall feel obliged by your punctuality."

At four o'clock precisely, when the royal family and the numerous guests were assembled, the curtains that concealed me opened, and I appeared on the stage. Owing to my repeated performances, I had fortunately acquired an imperturbable assurance and a confidence in myself which the success of my experiments fully justified.

I began in the most profound silence, for the party evidently wished to see and judge before giving me any encouragement. But, insensibly, they became excited, and I heard several exclamations of surprise, which were soon followed by still more expressive demonstrations.

All my tricks were very favourably received, and the one I had invented for the occasion gained me unbounded applause.

I will give a description of it:

I borrowed from my noble spectators several handkerchiefs, which I made into a parcel, and laid on the table. Then, at my request, different persons wrote on cards the names of places whither they desired the handkerchiefs to be invisibly transported.

When this had been done, I begged the king to take three of the cards at hazard, and choose from them the place he might consider most suitable.

"Let us see," Louis Philippe said, "what this one says: 'I desire the handkerchiefs to be found beneath one of the candelabra on the mantelpiece.' That is too easy for a sorcerer; so we will pass to the next card: 'The handkerchiefs are to be transported to the dome of the Invalides.' That would suit me, but it is much too far, not for the handkerchiefs, but for us. Ah, ah!" the king added, looking at the last card, "I am afraid, Monsieur Robert-Houdin, I am about to embarrass you. Do you know what this card proposes?"

"Will your majesty deign to inform me?"

"It is desired that you should send the handkerchiefs into the chest of the last orange-tree on the right of the avenue."

"Only that, sire? Deign to order, and I will obey."

"Very good, then; I should like to see such a magic act: I, therefore, choose the orange-tree chest."

The king gave some orders in a low voice, and I directly saw several persons run to the orange-tree, in order to watch it and prevent any fraud.

I was delighted at this precaution, which must add to the effect of my experiment, for the trick was already arranged, and the precaution hence too late.

I had now to send the handkerchiefs on their travels, so I placed them beneath a bell of opaque glass, and taking my wand, I ordered my invisible travellers to proceed to the spot the king had chosen.

I raised the bell; the little parcel was no longer there, and a white turtle-dove had taken its place.

The king then walked quickly to the door, whence he looked in the direction of the orange-tree, to assure himself that the guards were at their post; when this was done, he began to smile and shrug his shoulders.

"Ah! Monsieur Robert-Houdin," he said, somewhat ironically, "I much fear for the virtue of your magic staff." Then he added, as he returned to the end of the room, where several servants were standing, "Tell William to open immediately the last chest at the end of the avenue, and bring me carefully what he finds there—if he *does* find anything."

William soon proceeded to the orange-tree, and though much astonished at the orders given him, he began to carry them out.

He carefully removed one of the sides of the chest, thrust his hand in, and almost touched the roots of the tree before he found anything. All at once he uttered a cry of surprise, as he drew out a small iron coffer eaten by rust.

This curious "find," after having been cleaned from the mould, was brought in and placed on a small ottoman by the king's side.

"Well, Monsieur Robert-Houdin," Louis Philippe said to me, with a movement of impatient curiosity, "here is a box; am I to conclude it contains the handkerchiefs?"

"Yes, sire," I replied, with assurance, "and they have been there, too, for a long period."

"How can that be? the handkerchiefs were lent you scarce a quarter of an hour ago."

"I cannot deny it, sire; but what would my magic powers avail me if I could not perform incomprehensible tricks? Your majesty will doubtlessly be still more surprised, when I prove to your satisfaction that this coffer, as well as its contents, was deposited in the chest of the orange-tree sixty years ago."

"I should like to believe your statement," the king replied, with a smile; "but that is impossible, and I must, therefore, ask for proofs of your assertion."

"If your majesty will be kind enough to open this casket, they will be supplied."

"Certainly; but I shall require a key for that."

"It only depends on yourself, sire, to have one. Deign to remove it from the neck of this turtle-dove, which has just brought it you."

Louis Philippe unfastened a ribbon that held a small rusty key, with which he hastened to unlock the coffer.

The first thing that caught the king's eye was a parchment, on which he read the following statement:

THIS DAY, THE 6TH JUNE, 1786,

THIS IRON BOX, CONTAINING SIX HANDKERCHIEFS, WAS PLACED AMONG THE ROOTS OF AN ORANGE-TREE BY ME, BALSAMO, COUNT OF CAGLIOSTRO, TO SERVE IN PERFORMING AN ACT OF MAGIC, WHICH WILL BE EXECUTED ON THE SAME DAY SIXTY YEARS HENCE BEFORE LOUIS PHILIPPE OF ORLEANS AND HIS FAMILY.

"There is decidedly witchcraft about this," the king said, more and more amazed. "Nothing is wanting, for the seal and signature of the celebrated sorcerer are

placed at the foot of this statement, which, Heaven pardon me, smells strongly of sulphur."

At this jest, the audience began to laugh.

"But," the king added, taking out of the box a carefully sealed packet, "can the handkerchiefs by possibility be in this?"

"Indeed, sire, they are; but, before opening the parcel, I would request your majesty to notice that it also bears the impression of Cagliostro's seal."

This seal, once rendered so famous by being placed on the celebrated alchemist's bottles of elixir and liquid gold, I had obtained from Torrini, who had been an old friend of Cagliostro's.

"It is certainly the same," my royal spectator answered, after comparing the two seals. Still, in his impatience to learn the contents of the parcel, the king quickly tore open the envelope, and soon displayed before the astounded spectators the six handkerchiefs which, a few moments before, were still on my table.

This trick gained me lively applause, but in my second sight, which was to terminate the performance, I had really to sustain a terrible struggle, as the king had warned me.

Among the objects handed me, there was, I remem-

ber, a medal, which it was expected would embarrass me. Still, I had no sooner taken it in my hand than my son described it in the following terms:

"It is," he said, confidently, "a Greek medal of bronze, on which is a word composed of six letters, which I will spell: *lamba*, *epsilon*, *mu*, *nu*, *omicron*, *sigma*, which makes *Lemnos*."

My son knew the Greek alphabet; hence, he could read the word Lemnos, although he could not possibly have translated it.

This was in itself a severe trial for so young a lad; but it did not satisfy the royal family.

I was handed a small Chinese coin with a hole through the centre, and its name and value were immediately indicated; and, lastly, a difficulty, from which I managed to escape successfully, was the brilliant finale of my performance.

I had been surprised to see the Duchess of Orleans, who took a lively interest in the second sight, retire to her apartments; but she soon returned, and handed me a small case, the contents of which she wished my son to describe, but I must be careful not to open it.

I had foreseen this prohibition; so, while the prin-

cess was speaking to me, I opened the case with one hand, and, by a rapid glance, satisfied myself as to its contents. Still, I pretended for a moment to be startled by the proposal, in order to produce a greater effect.

"Your highness," I remarked, as I returned the case, "will allow me to appeal against such a proposal, for you must have remarked that, until now, I required to see the object before my son could name it."

"Yet you have surmounted greater difficulties," the amiable duchess retorted. "However, if it is not possible, let us say no more about it, for I should be grieved to cause you any embarrassment."

"What your highness wishes is, I repeat, impossible; and yet my son, feeling anxious to justify the confidence you place in his clairvoyance, will attempt to see through the case, and describe its contents."

"Can he do so even through my hands?" the duchess continued, trying to conceal the case.

"Yes, madam, and even if your highness were in the next room, my son would be able to see it."

The duchess, declining the new trial I proposed, satisfied herself by questioning my son with her own lips.

The boy, who had long received his instructions, replied, without hesitation, "There is in the case a diamond pin, the stone being surrounded by a garter of sky-blue enamel."

"That is perfectly correct," the duchess said, as she showed the ornament to the king. "Judge for yourself, sire;" then, turning to me, she added, with infinite grace, "Monsieur Robert-Houdin, will you accept this pin in remembrance of your visit to St. Cloud?"

I thanked her highness sincerely, as I assured her of my gratitude.

The performance was over: the curtain fell, and, in my turn, I was enabled to enjoy a curious scene at my ease; it was to look through a small hole at my audience, who had assembled in groups, and were talking about the impression I had produced.

Before leaving the château, the king and queen again sent me the most flattering messages by the person charged to hand me a souvenir of their munificence.

This representation could not increase my reputation —that was not possible—but it helped powerfully to maintain it. My performance at St. Cloud, more espe-

cially, created a sensation among the aristocracy, who, until that moment, had hesitated about visiting my small room. Their curiosity overcame other considerations, and they came in their turn to assure themselves of the reality of the marvels attributed to me.

The summer heats were, however, beginning to be felt: we had reached the commencement of July, and I had to think about closing my theatre. However, instead of running after fortune, as in the previous year, I occupied myself with changing and improving my performance. The task was heavy; for I was filled with bold emulation, as I could not conceal from myself that my success imposed certain duties on me, and that, in order to keep it up, I must be constantly deserving of it.

The most painful part of my inquiries was, that my inventions must be completed by a certain day and hour, for the reopening of my theatre was fixed for the first of the next September, and, for many reasons, I determined on being punctual.

For two months I worked with great ardour, granting myself no rest or pleasure. Sometimes, however, after dinner on Sunday, I allowed myself a

recreation which may seem strange to many of my readers: I went to the fairs round Paris, and studied the mountebanks. There I amused myself, I may say, as much as any of the spectators around me; though the pleasure I felt was not of the same nature as that of my neighbours. I amused myself by seeing their amusement, and nothing more; for any one who has seen this style of spectacle must have noticed that the mountebank gives his public very little for their money. The best part of the sight is often seen outside.

CHAPTER IV.

New Experiments—Aërial Suspension, &c.—A Performance at the Odéon—A Friend in Need—1848—The Theatres deserted—I leave Paris for London—Manager Mitchell—Publicity in England—The Great Wizard—A Butter-mould used as a Puff—Singular Bills—A Prize for the best Pun.

INSTEAD of being able to recommence my performances on the 1st of September, as I had hoped, my compulsory holidays, which might be called my "penal servitude," were prolonged another month, and it was not till the 1st of October that I was prepared to offer my new experiments to the public.

My pecuniary interests were much affected by this delay, but I trusted, correctly enough, to the zeal of the public to visit me, as a compensation.

My new repertory contained the *Crystal Box*, the *Fantastic Portfolio*, the *Trapèze Tumbler*, the *Garde*

Française, the *Origin of Flowers*, the *Crystal Balls*, the *Inexhaustible Bottle*, the *Ethereal Suspension*, &c.

I had devoted especial care to the last experiment, on which I built great hopes. Surgery had supplied me with the first idea of it.

It will be remembered that in 1847 the insensibility produced by inhaling ether began to be applied in surgical operations; all the world talked about the marvellous effect of this anæsthetic, and its extraordinary results. In the eyes of many people it seemed much akin to magic.

Seeing that the surgeons invaded my domain, I asked myself if this did not allow me to make reprisals. I did so by inventing my *ethereal suspension*, which, I believe, was far more surprising than any result obtained by my surgical brethren.

The subject I intended to operate on was my younger son, and I could not have selected one better suited for the experiment. He was a stout lad of about six years of age, and his plump and rosy face was the picture of health. In spite of his youth, he displayed the greatest intelligence in learning his part, and played it with such perfection, that the most incredulous were duped.

This trick was very much applauded, and I am bound to say that my arrangements were excellently made: this was the first time I tried to direct the surprise of my spectators by gradually heightening it up to the moment when, so to speak, it exploded.

I divided my experiment into three parts, each more surprising than the former.

Thus, when I removed the stool from beneath the child's feet, the public, who had smiled during the preparations for the suspension, became thoughtful.

When I next removed one of the canes, exclamations of surprise and fear were heard.

Lastly, at the moment when I raised my son to an horizontal position, the spectators, at this unexpected result, crowned the experiment with hearty applause.

Still, it sometimes happened that sensitive persons, regarding the etherisation too seriously, protested in their hearts against the applause, and wrote me letters in which they severely upbraided the unnatural father who sacrificed the health of his poor child to the pleasures of the public. Some went so far as to threaten me with the terrors of the law if I did not give up my inhuman performance.

The anonymous writers of such accusations did not

suspect the pleasure they caused me. After amusing the family circle, I kept the letters preciously as proofs of the illusion I had produced.

The fashion this performance raised could not surpass that of the previous year: I could not expect any other result than filling my theatre, and that occurred every evening.

The royal family also wished to see my new experiments; and for this purpose the whole room was taken for the afternoon, so that my evening performances were not interrupted.

This performance, which the Queen of the Belgians witnessed with her family, was only so far peculiar, that my little room was filled with exalted personages. All the seats were occupied, for their majesties were accompanied by their respective courts, and a great number of ambassadors and royal dignitaries.

As I had reason to hope, my noble spectators were satisfied, and deigned to thank me in person.

In the midst of this gentle satisfaction, I had every reason to believe that I possessed the favour of the public; I learned, though, at a heavy penalty, that even if the favour of that sovereign may appear secured, a trifle will cause it almost to expire.

On the 18th of February, 1848, Madame Dorval took her benefit at the Odéon, and I promised that eminent actress to perform some of my tricks as an interlude.

I was punctual to my appointment across the water; half-past eleven struck, when the curtain fell just prior to my performance. As I had been ready to begin for some time, ten minutes were sufficient to give a final glance to my preparations.

My first care, on taking possession of the stage, had been to conceal my operations from indiscreet eyes; hence, I had dismissed everybody. Unfortunately, I had not even made an exception in favour of the stage-manager, and the sorrowful effects of this measure will now be seen.

In most excellent humour, I ordered my servant to give the three usual taps, and the orchestra began playing while I walked to the side-scene, prior to making my appearance. But at the moment the curtain rose, I remembered I had forgotten one of my "accessories," and I ran to my dressing-room to fetch it. Unfortunately, in my hurry, I did not notice that the machinist had inadvertently left a small trap open, and my leg slipped into it up to the knee.

The pain drew from me a sharp cry of distress; my servant ran up, and he could only release me with some difficulty. But I was in a sad state, for my trouser was torn completely up, exposing my bleeding and lacerated leg.

In this unhappy condition, I could not possibly return to the stage; hence I looked around in search of some one to announce to the public the accident that had happened to me, but I could only see two firemen. They would not do for so delicate a mission, and although I had my servant, this worthy lad was a negro with woolly head, blubber lips, and an ebony skin, whose simple language would not have failed to raise a laugh at my painful position.

The stage-manager alone could undertake the mission; but where should I find him?

These reflections, prompt as lightning, were interrupted by the commencement of a storm in the theatre; the public summoned me, for it must be remembered the curtain had risen, and in the eyes of the public I had missed my entrance; this was disrespect, and, therefore, unpardonable!

My negro, without caring for what was passing elsewhere, tore up his handkerchief and mine, and

bound my wound with considerable skill. This did not prevent me suffering severe pain, but I soon experienced a torture a thousand-fold greater when I heard a violent storm burst out in the house. The public, who had begun by stamping, were now hissing, shouting, and yelling in all the discordant tones of dissatisfaction.

Overcoming my pain, I changed my trousers in haste, and decided on going myself to describe my accident. I therefore walked slowly to the door of the stage, and I was just going to open it, when a frightful noise turned me cold with terror, and checked me. My heart failed me. Still, I put a stop to this. "Courage," I said to myself, with a supreme effort— "courage!" and straightway throwing open the folding doors, I walked on the stage.

I shall never forget my reception. On one hand, cries, hisses, yells; on the other, clapping of hands and applause, enough to wake the dead. The two parties were apparently attempting to conquer each other in making a noise.

Pale and trembling at such a rough reception, I waited patiently for a moment when the combatants, wearied with the contest, would allow me to explain my

delay. This moment at length arrived, and I was enabled to describe my painful adventure. My paleness testified to the truth of my words. The public allowed themselves to be disarmed, and hisses were no longer mingled with the applause which greeted my explanation.

Any one who knows the relief and comfort bravos and hearty applause arouse in the heart of an actor, will understand the sudden change they produced in me. The blood rushed to my cheeks and restored my colour, my strength returned, and, possessed by fresh energy, I stated to the public that I found myself so much recovered that I would go on with my performance. I did so; and such was the power of my excitement, that I scarce felt the pain produced by my wound.

I have said that, on my appearance, I was saluted by demonstrations of a very different nature. Although many of my spectators hissed, others applauded me. Truth extorts a confession from me. I was supported on this evening by an omnipotent protector.

This requires an explanation. Hence, that my readers may solve the enigma, I am obliged to narrate a slight anecdote:

At the period when I invented my experiment of second sight, several Parisian managers proposed to me to perform, as an interlude, in their theatres, but I had refused, because, as I was tired by my own performances, I did not wish to prolong them. My determination on this point was quite formed, when I received a visit from an actress of the Palais Royal, Madame M——, who performed the part of duennas.

"I have not the honour of your acquaintance, sir," she said, with a certain degree of hesitation, "hence I am almost afraid to ask you to render me a great service. These are the circumstances of the case: our excellent manager, Dormeuil, has offered me a benefit, the profits of which are intended to release my son from the conscription. It only depends on you, sir, to ensure the success of the performance by giving me your assistance." And the poor mother, deriving her eloquence from her love for her son, painted in such lively colours the distress she would feel from a failure, that, touched by her grief, I rescinded my determination, and consented to add my performance of the "second sight" to her bill.

I dare not form the flattering idea that my name had any share in the success of the performance; still,

the house was crowded, and the receipts more than covered the price of a substitute.

The next day the happy mother called to tell me of her good fortune, and thank me. She was accompanied by a gentleman I did not know, but who, so soon as Madame M—— had ceased speaking, told me in his turn the object of his visit.

"I have taken the liberty of accompanying Madame M—— to compliment you on what you have done for her. It is a good action, for which all her theatrical friends owe you abundant thanks; and, for my part, I hope, sooner or later, to evidence my gratitude in my own way."

While flattered at my visitor's remarks, I was much puzzled as to the sense of his last sentence. He noticed it, and, giving me no time to reply, continued:

"Ah! I forgot to tell you who I am, and I ought to have begun with that. My name is Duhart, and I manage theatrical successes at the Palais Royal. By the way," he added, "were you satisfied with the reception you had last night?"

This confession, I grant, robbed me of a sweet illusion. I had fancied I owed my reception to my own merits, and I now could not guess what share of the

applause legitimately belonged to me. Still, I thanked M. Duhart for his kindness, both past and to come. Three months later, I had almost forgotten this incident, when one day, as I was going to give a performance at the Porte Saint-Martin, my friend Duhart called upon me.

"Only one word, Monsieur Houdin," he said, without taking the trouble to sit down. "I read in the bills that you are going to perform for Raucourt's benefit, and I have recommended you to P——, who will 'take care of you.'"

I was, in fact, "taken care of," for when I appeared on the stage, I was greeted by a reception worthy of the highest artistic celebrities. It was easy to recognise an ovation warmly recommended, but I was glad to notice that the public "followed suit," and that the bravos emanating from the pit radiated through the whole house.

A few months later, when about to perform at the Gymnase, came another visit from Duhart, the same recommendation to his comrade, and a similar result. In short, I rarely quitted my own stage but my grateful protector interested himself in my success.

I am forced to say that I let him do so, and saw no

harm in it; far from that, these encouragements were a stimulant for me, and I always redoubled my efforts to deserve them.

I have taken a pride in relating this incident, for it admirably depicts the character of a man capable of being so long grateful for a slight service rendered to a friend. However, the performance at the Odéon was the last in which the worthy Duhart went out of his way for me, as the revolution of February arrived a few days later.

It will be remembered that this event was an utter "smasher" for all the theatres.

After exhausting all the attractive baits of their repertory, the managers, finding all their attractions fail, vainly formed a congress to relieve them from such a disastrous situation.

I was invited to the meeting, but, though I put in an appearance, it was merely through politeness, as I was in a position very different from that of my brethren.

This position depended simply on the fact that my establishment, instead of having the name of a theatre, was called a "spectacle." Through this slight difference of title I enjoyed rights infinitely more extended.

Thus, while the theatres could only have bills of a size arranged by a police decree, I was at liberty, as the manager of a spectacle, to announce my performances in unbounded proportions.

I could also lessen or increase the number of my performances at my pleasure, which was not one of the slightest advantages of my management.

Lastly, I had a right, whenever I thought proper, to put the key of my room in my pocket, dismiss my staff, and walk about at my leisure in expectation of better times.

All these advantages, to which I will add that of being burdened with very slight expenses compared with my brethren, offered me no other result than that of not losing my money. However I might try, the public remained deaf to my appeal as to theirs.

I am mistaken, though; for some days I received very polite letters from the Provisional Government, in the shape of "free passes," which begged me to find room in my hall for the students of the Polytechnic and St. Cyr schools, accompanied by their tutors.

I was enchanted, it is true, by this amiable act of politeness, which augmented the number of my scanty spectators; for I performed, at least, before a well-

filled room, and I had no longer the annoyance of seeing those unlucky benches empty—a sight which usually paralyses the most philosophic performers.

This illusion was, in truth, very ephemeral, for each evening, after the performance, my cashier assumed a very gloomy face on approaching me.

What disenchantment! What bitter reprisals on the part of the blind goddess who, for some time, had granted me such sweet favours!

Still, in these moments of distress, I may say with perfect sincerity deceptions and torment were not confined to the profit and loss account; and though a manager does not take money, he desires to conceal his misery. In order to produce a deception, he tries to furnish his theatre, and he gives free admissions. I had recourse to this measure; but, what will appear strange, these tickets, which, a month earlier, would have been regarded as an immense favour, were viewed with considerable indifference, and it often happened that people did not take the trouble to accept my invitation.

Having become a philosopher through necessity, I ended by resigning myself to seeing my room nearly empty, and I sent out no more invitations. Besides, I

had enjoyed an opportunity of studying the "free admissions," and I had remarked that this class of spectators is, or pretends to be, quite indifferent to the performance. In fact, the "free admission," when he believes the theatre short of spectators, imagines he is doing an act of kindness by accepting the invitation offered him. If he finds the house full, he fancies all the places are occupied by gratis tickets (and he is sometimes correct), and he concludes from it that the performance cannot be very amusing. If he happen to be mistaken, he does not applaud, in his fear of being taken for a gratuitous visitor, and pass for an accomplice paying for his seat in applause.

I was in the thick of my managerial troubles when, one morning, I received a visit from the manager of the French theatre in London. Mitchell (that is his name), far from seeking to delude me by false promises, like my Brussels theatrical agent, merely made me the following simple proposal:

"Monsieur Robert-Houdin," he said to me, "you are well known in London; come and perform at the St. James's Theatre, and I have every reason to believe you will be successful. Besides, we shall be equally interested, for we will share the gross receipts, and I

will pay all the expenses. You will perform alternately with my Opéra Comique, that is to say, on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays, and you will begin, if you please, on the 7th of May next, or a month from to-day."

These conditions appearing to me very acceptable, I may add, most advantageous, I agreed to them most readily. Mitchell, then, offered me his hand, I gave him mine, and this friendly sanction was the only agreement we made for this important affair. Though there was no forfeit on either side, no arrangement or signature, never was a bargain better cemented.

From that time, during all my long connexion with Mitchell, I had many occasions of appreciating all the value of his word. I may say loudly that he is one of the most conscientious managers I ever had dealings with. In addition, Mitchell adds an extreme affability, and a remarkable degree of generosity and disinterestedness to the merit of keeping his word. Under all circumstances, he will be found to act as a perfect gentleman, and one of the most brilliant qualities he possesses as manager, is his courteous behaviour to his performers. The following instance will serve as a proof:

Jenny Lind was singing at Her Majesty's Theatre on the same evenings I performed at St. James's, so that, despite all the wish I felt to go and hear her, I could not make up my mind to sacrifice a performance for this attractive pleasure. However, in consequence of a circumstance too lengthy to detail here, I happened to find myself free on one of the nights when Jenny Lind sang. I must add that, besides managing the St. James's Theatre, Mitchell had hired a certain number of boxes at Her Majesty's by the year, and, according to the English custom, let them out to the highest bidders. It happened at times that all the tickets were not sold, and in that case Mitchell gave them to a few privileged friends. I was aware of this circumstance, and intended to ask him a similar favour for this evening.

At the moment I was going out to seek my manager, he came into my room.

"By Jove, my dear Mitchell," I said to him, "I was just going to prefer a request to you."

"Whatever it may be, my dear friend," he replied, politely, "be assured it will be willingly heard."

And when I explained to him what I wanted,

"Good Heavens! Houdin," he said, in a tone of

real annoyance, "how unlucky you should ask that of me."

"Why so?" I replied, in the same tone; "if it is not possible, my dear friend, pray let me withdraw my request."

"On the contrary, my dear Houdin—on the contrary, it is very easy; I am only vexed at missing the surprise I intended to offer you: I was going to give you an excellent box for to-night: here it is."

A more delicate and amiable way of behaving could hardly be suggested.

A fortnight had scarce elapsed since my interview with Mitchell, when, after a most successful passage, I disembarked at London. On the moment of my arrival, my manager led me to a delightful lodging close to the theatre, and showed me all the rooms. On reaching the sleeping apartment, he said:

"You have a celebrated bed before you: it is the one in which Rachel, Déjazet, Jenny Colon, and many other artistic celebrities, rested after the emotion produced by their successes. You cannot but enjoy the ideas which the remembrance of these illustrious guests will summon up in your dreams. To any other than you, my dear Houdin, I would say that these

celebrated predecessors must bring good luck; but your success depends on the virtue of your magic staff."

Mitchell, feeling desirous to add all desirable attraction to my performances, had ordered a scene in the Louis XV. style, as well as a curtain, on which was painted, in letters of gold, the title adopted for my Paris theatre, "*Soirées Fantastiques de* ROBERT-HOUDIN:" consequently, I could not begin my arrangements till all these preparations had been completed.

In the mean while, having nothing better to do, I walked about daily in the magnificent parks, and collected my strength, in preparation for the fatigues I was about to undergo in my performances.

At this word "fatigues," my reader will be doubtlessly surprised, for he has every reason to suppose that my stay in London would be in some degree a period of rest, as, instead of playing seven times a week, as in Paris, I was only to give three performances in the same period.

To explain this apparent contradiction, it will be enough for me to state that the work and fatigue are less in the performance than in its preparation. As

at St. James's Theatre I had to perform alternately with the Comic Opera, I was obliged, lest I might impede these artists in their studies, to give them all necessary time for their rehearsals, which, as is well known, occupy the greater portion of the day. Consequently, I had promised to clear the stage so soon as my performance was over, and not occupy it again till the middle of the day on which I performed. Add to this, that in my labour of preparing and removing, the master's eye was not sufficient, but I had for various reasons to set to work myself, and it may be easily understood that this caused me enormous fatigue.

It caused me at the outset a species of comical regret to find that my performances would not owe their success entirely to my own merits. In England it is almost impossible to gain the ear of the public unless every possible form of notoriety be resorted to, and the change from my peaceful retirement in Paris was very startling. Whenever I took my walks abroad, my name in gigantic letters stared me in the face, while enormous posters, on which my various tricks were represented, covered the walls of London, and, according to the English fashion, were prome-

naded about the streets, by the help of a vehicle like those we employ in Paris for removing furniture.

But, however great this publicity might be, it was quite modest when compared to that opposed to us by a rival, who may be justly regarded as the most ingenious and skilful puffer in England.

On my arrival in England, a conjuror of the name of Anderson, who assumed the title of *Great Wizard of the North*, had been performing for a long period at the little Strand Theatre.

This artist, fearing, doubtlessly, that public attention might be divided, tried to crush the publicity of my performances; hence, he sent out on London streets a cavalcade thus organised:

Four enormous carriages, covered with posters and pictures representing all sorts of witchcraft, opened the procession. Then followed four-and-twenty merry men, each bearing a banner, on which was painted a letter a yard in height.

At each cross-road the four carriages stopped side by side and presented a bill some twenty-five yards in length, while all the men, I should say letters, on receiving the word of command, drew themselves up in a line, like the vehicles.

Seen in front, the letters formed this phrase:

THE CELEBRATED ANDERSON!!!

while, on the other side of the banners could be read:

THE GREAT WIZARD OF THE NORTH.

Unfortunately for the Wizard, his performances were attacked by a mortal disease; too long a stay in London had ended by producing satiety. Besides, his repertory was out of date, and could not contend against the new tricks I was about to offer. What could he present to the public in opposition to the second sight, the suspension, and the inexhaustible bottle? Hence, he was obliged to close his theatre and start for the provinces, where he managed, as usual, to make excellent receipts, owing to his powerful means of notoriety.

I have met many "puffers" in my life, but I may say I never saw one who attained the elevation Anderson reached. The instance I have quoted will give some idea of his manner, but I will add a few others, to supply a perfect idea of the man.

Whenever his performances are going to be given in a large town, though they are announced with extreme publicity, Anderson contrives to bring his wonders to the notice even of those who never read the newspapers or posters.

For this purpose, he sends to all the buttermen in the town moulds on which his name, title, and the hour of his performance are engraved, begging them to imprint his stamp on their butter-pats, in lieu of the cow ordinarily represented. As every family in England eats butter at breakfast, it follows that each receives, at no expense to the conjuror, an invitation to pay a visit to the illustrious Wizard of the North.

Again, too, Anderson sends out into the streets, before daybreak, a dozen men, carrying those open frames, by means of which, and with a brush and lamp-black, the walls of Paris have been so long covered with puffs. These people print the announcement of the Wizard's performance on the pavement, which is always kept remarkably clean in England. In spite of himself, every tradesman on opening his shop, and every inhabitant proceeding to business, cannot but read the name of Anderson, and the announcement of his performance. It is true that a few hours later these puffs are effaced by the footsteps of the passers-by, but thousands of persons have read them, and the Wizard requires no more.

His posters are equally original, and I was shown one of a gigantic size put out on the occasion of his

return to London after a lengthened absence in the provinces. It was a caricature imitation of the famous picture "Napoleon's Return from Elba."

In the foreground Anderson was seen affecting the attitude of the great man; above his head fluttered an enormous banner, bearing the words "The Wonder of the World;" while, behind him, and somewhat lost in the shade, the Emperor of Russia and several other monarchs stood in a respectful posture. As in the original picture, the fanatic admirers of the Wizard embraced his knees, while an immense crowd received him triumphantly. In the distance could be seen the equestrian statue of the Iron Duke, who, hat in hand, bowed before him, the Great Wizard; and, lastly, the very dome of St. Paul's bent towards him most humbly.

At the bottom was the inscription,

"RETURN OF THE NAPOLEON OF NECROMANCY."

Regarded seriously, this picture would be found a puff in very bad taste; but, as a caricature, it is excessively comic. Besides, it had the double result of making the London public laugh, and bringing a great number of shillings into the skilful puffer's pockets.

When Anderson is about to leave a town where he has exhausted all his resources, and has nothing more to hope, he still contrives to make one more enormous haul.

He orders from the first jeweller in the town a silver vase, worth twenty or twenty-five pounds; he hires, for one evening only, the largest theatre or room in the town, and announces that in the Wizard's parting performance the spectators will compete to make the best pun.

The silver vase is to be the prize of the victor.

A jury is chosen among the chief people of the town to decide with the public on the merits of each pun.

It is agreed that they will applaud if they think a pun good; they will say nothing to a passable one, but groan at a bad one.

The room is always crowded, for people come less to see the performance, which they know by heart, than to display their wit publicly. Each makes his jest, and receives a greeting more or less favourable; and, lastly, the vase is decreed to the cleverest among them.

Any other than Anderson would be satisfied with the enormous receipts his performance produces; but

the Great Wizard of the North has not finished yet. Before the audience leave the house he states that a short-hand writer had been hired by him to take down all the puns, and that they will be published as a Miscellany.

As each spectator who has made a joke likes to see it in print, he purchases a copy of the book for a shilling. An idea of the number of these copies may be formed from the number of puns they contain. I have one of these books in my possession, printed at Glasgow in 1850, in which there are 1091 of these facetiæ.

The charlatan style of Anderson's bills is most amusing—at least I regard it as such; for it is not presumable that Anderson ever intended sincerely to praise himself in such an outrageous way. If I am mistaken, it would be more than vanity on his part, when I take into consideration his conjuring talent. Hence I believe him to be very modest at heart.

CHAPTER V.

The St. James's Theatre—Invasion of England by French Performers —A Fête patronised by the Queen — The Diplomatist and the Sleight-of-Hand Man—Three Thousand Pounds taken at one Haul —I perform at Manchester—The Spectators in the Pillory—What capital Curaçoa! — A Torrent of Wine —A Catastrophe — Performance at Buckingham Palace—A Wizard's Repast.

But it is time to return to St. James's: the machinists, painters, and decorators have finished their work, for the 2nd of May has arrived, the day fixed for my stage being handed over to me.

In fact, every one was admirably punctual: the new scenery was in its place at an early hour, and as, at Mitchell's request, the rehearsals were suspended for that day, the theatre was entirely at my service; hence I could devote myself quietly to the preparations for my performance. However, all had been so well arranged beforehand, that I was in perfect readiness when the audience began entering the house.

It may be supposed I had taken every possible precaution to ensure success, for an experiment which must excite astonishment if it succeed, in the event of failure is ruin to the operator. Hence I sincerely pity those sorcerers whose supernatural power hangs on a thread.

It is true that a skilful conjuror ought always to be able to escape any difficulty that may occur to him; still, this sort of repairs very rarely meets with success, for, after all, it is only a patching together, in which the cracks are only too visible.

I had a mode of escape always at hand in any emergency, but I confess I was much vexed when compelled to have recourse to these secondary means, which, by prolonging the experiment, render it far less striking.

When a failure happens in tricks of skill an escape is impossible, for a conjuror ought no more to fail in these than a good musician play a false note. Whenever he makes a mistake in such a case, it results from his want of adroitness, which only time can correct; but in our experiments accidents at times happen which the most careful man cannot foresee. In such an event, you can only trust to the expedients which presence of mind suggests.

Thus, one day, I happened to break the glass of a watch lent me for a trick. My position was awkward, for it is a very clumsy termination to a trick to return an object lent you in any way injured.

I quietly walked up to the gentleman who had lent me the watch, and offered it to him, while being very careful to keep the face downwards; but, at the moment he was going to take it, I drew it back.

"This is your watch?" I said, confidently.

"Yes, sir, it is."

"Well, I merely wished to prove the fact; will you, sir," I added, sinking my voice to a whisper, "lend it to me for another trick which I intend to perform presently?"

"Willingly," the obliging spectator replied.

I then carried the watch on the stage, and, handing it secretly to my servant, I bade him go at full speed to a watchmaker's, and have a new glass put in.

Half an hour later, I returned the watch to its owner, saying:

"I have just noticed to my regret that the lateness of the hour will preclude me from performing the trick I promised you; but as I hope to have the pleasure of seeing you again at my performances, please to remind

me the first time you come, and I shall then be able to perform the interesting trick."

I was saved.

In the mean while, the public were entering the theatre, but so quietly that, although my dressing-room was close to the stage, I heard scarcely any noise in the house. I was frightened at this, for such a quiet entry is in France a sure prognostic of bad receipts for the manager, and sinister foreboding of a failure to the performer.

When I was able to proceed on the stage, I ran to the curtain-hole, and I saw with as much surprise as pleasure the house completely filled, and presenting, in addition, the most charming company I had ever yet performed before.

I must say, too, that the St. James's Theatre is a splendid establishment, for it is in some degree the gathering-place of the flower of the English aristocracy, who visit it not merely to enjoy the performances, but also to improve their pronunciation of French.

One fact will give an idea of the elegance and fashion of my spectators; no lady is allowed to keep

on her bonnet, however elegant it may be; she is obliged to leave it in the saloon. This is, indeed, a thorough English fashion, for the ladies come to the theatre in evening costume, with their hair beautifully arranged, and low-necked dresses, while the gentlemen are attired in black, with white neck-handkerchiefs and gloves.

At St. James's, the pit only exists traditionally; it is driven under the boxes, and its presence is scarcely noticed. All the body of the house is filled with stalls, or rather elegant arm-chairs, to which ladies are admitted.

The price of the seats is in proportion to the comfort they offer; each stall costs seven shillings, and you can enter the modest pit for three shillings; but this is no dearer than at the Opera.

While I was surveying this elegant assembly with delight, I felt a gentle tap on my shoulder. It was Mitchell, who came to give me a delicate hint about some invitations he had thought it advisable to send out.

"Well, Houdin," he said to me, "how do you like your examination? does the audience please you?"

"It is delightful, my dear Mitchell; I may add, it is the first time I ever performed in a theatre to such a brilliant audience."

"Brilliant is the very word, my friend, for you must know that, among your admirers" (pardon me this word of praise, but I am quoting Mitchell), "is the whole of the English Press, which possesses a numerous staff. We shall also have as spectators some gentlemen whose opinion exercises a very great influence in London drawing-rooms. And lastly, a great number of places are occupied by artistic celebrities, who will justly appreciate the Robert-Houdin whom, to employ the champagne phrase, we have made 'sparkle' as he deserves."

It may be imagined that, after this explanation, my performance seemed to me a solemnity, and that I employed the utmost care and zeal in executing my tricks. I am justified in stating that I obtained a legitimate success.

Shall I now speak of the kindness and encouragement I received from the audience of St. James's Theatre? I will appeal to the celebrated artistes who have performed on this stage before me: Rachel, Roger, Samson, Regnier, Duplessis, Déjazet, Bouffé, Levassor,

&c.; have they ever found in Europe spectators comparable to those of St. James's? Here there are no paid clappers; they would be superfluous, for the audience take upon themselves to encourage the performers. The gentlemen are not afraid of bursting their gloves, while the ladies make as much noise with their tiny hands as their strength allows.

But I must stop, for I should fear, were I to continue, drifting into the style of the Great Wizard.

My performances went on at St. James's, and amply consoled me for my losses in Paris. Although I only performed three times a week, their produce exceeded that of my best days at home. My readers might imagine that such unequivocal success ought to have satisfied me, but, as I have said before, I am naturally ambitious, and I longed for one decisive triumph—I wished to have my performance honoured by the presence of the Queen. Under happier auspices I doubt not that the honour would have fallen to my share, but at the moment there was a peculiar difficulty, which I saw no mode of overcoming. I will describe it in as summary a manner as I can.

After the revolution, the French theatres, as I have already said, found their receipts reduced to worthless

free tickets; hence they sought in neighbouring countries, just as I had done myself, a public less engaged with politics, and consequently more apt to yield to the attraction of amusement.

England was the only country that had made no change in its habits of luxury and pleasure, and hence many managers turned their longing eyes towards this El Dorado.

The Palais Royal Theatre, which, by the way, was not the worst off, was one of the first to draw a bill at sight upon the rich metropolis of England.

Dormeuil, its skilful manager, divided his company into two parts, one remaining at Paris, while the other came to the St. James's Theatre in the place of the Opéra Comique, which had ended its engagement with Mitchell. Levassor, Grassot, Ravel, Mlle. Scrivaneck, &c., received a brilliant reception from our mutual audience.

This success became known in Paris, and turned the head of M. H——, manager of the Historic Theatre.

After making arrangements with the proprietors of a London theatre (Covent Garden, I think), the impresario also came across with a portion of his com-

pany to perform his play of *Monte-Christo*, which lasted two evenings.

The arrival of these performers, all of great merit generally, disturbed the peace of the English managers, who, fearing with some reason the entire loss of their audiences, resolved to oppose this dangerous invasion.

"The French and Italian theatres in London," they said in their attacks, "can play on their boards whatever pieces they like; they are privileged to do so, and we respect their right. But we will not permit all our theatres to be thus invaded, or Shakspeare be dethroned by foreign playwrights."

The question of theatrical rivalry soon assumed the character of a national one. The papers took up the cause of the theatres, while the public adopted the opinion of the press writers, and formed an army to fight against the new comers.

M. H——, attempted, however, to perform Alexandre Dumas's masterpiece; but it was impossible to hear a word, so great were the noise and confusion in the house during the whole time the performance lasted. Although the manager persevered in his enterprise, he was at length obliged to yield to

this imposing protest, which threatened to degenerate into a collision, and he decided on closing the theatre.

Mitchell held out his hand to the unlucky manager, and offered him the hospitality of his theatre, that he might at least play his double piece once before he left London. For this purpose, he granted him one night of the Palais Royal performances, and promised to arrange with me for the next night.

I could refuse Mitchell nothing, and the drama was represented in its entirety, after which the company returned to France.

I granted this favour with the greatest pleasure, as it obliged many amiable performers, and I will add that, were a similar occasion offered me to oblige M. H—— again, I would gladly accept it, if only to remind him about thanking me for the first service I did him.

Fortunately for my hopes, an occasion was offered me for performing before her Majesty, of which I gladly availed myself, as it enabled me, at the same time, to do some slight service in the cause of charity. The occasion I will here describe, as it affords a pleasing trait of English manners and customs.

A benevolent fête, the object of which was to open baths for the poor, had been organised by the first ladies in the land, and it was to be held at a delicious villa at Fulham, belonging to Sir Arthur Webster, who had kindly placed it at the disposal of the lady patronesses.

This graceful swarm of sisters of charity was composed of ten duchesses, fifteen marchionesses, and some thirty countesses, viscountesses, and baronesses, at the head of whom was the Queen, who intended to honour the fête by her presence. This was more than sufficient to dispose of the tickets, however high the price might be. Still, the ladies conscientiously desired to add some attraction, which would occupy the afternoon agreeably. The first idea was to arrange a concert, and, of course, the chief singers in the metropolis must be invited to join, as the company was so select; hence the committee turned their eyes to Her Majesty's Theatre.

But there a difficulty arose: they must ask each artiste to display his talent gratuitously, and as this was begging a favour, the embassy placed the fair promoters in a delicate position which they hesitated to accept.

Fortunately for them, these ladies had taken care to enlist the services of my manager, whose intelligent advice would be most useful in arranging the fête.

Mitchell was requested to call on the artisies, and he soon drew up a most remarkable list: it contained Madame Grisi, Madame Castellan, Madame Alboni, Mario, Roger (then engaged at Her Majesty's Theatre), Tamburini, and Lablache.

After the concert a divertissement was to take place which must excite the public curiosity. A large number of ladies, dressed in costumes selected from all parts of the world, had promised to form fancy quadrilles on the lawn, in which they would perform character dances, and for this purpose elegant and spacious tents were erected.

But this spectacle could only last an hour, and there were still two to be filled up, in which the guests could only be offered the pleasure of walking about. It was evident this was not enough, especially when we remember the price of the tickets was two pounds. Hence the committee naturally thought of my performance.

Mitchell had expected this, so he took on himself,

owing to our friendly connexion, to obtain my consent. He did more, for wishing in his turn to offer his alms to the poor, he offered to build, at his own expense, a theatre in the ground, and transfer to it the scenery I had at the theatre. This was, in some respects, removing St. James's Theatre to Fulham.

Mitchell told me of this lucky event, from which he expected the best results, and I may say at once that his expectations were realised. As soon as it was known that the Queen would deign to be present at one of my performances, many members of the aristocracy, who had not yet visited the St. James's Theatre, sent to order boxes.

On the day fixed for the Fulham festival, I started after breakfast for Sir Arthur Webster's residence. My manager, with the machinist of the theatre, had been at work there from an early hour, so that, when I arrived, I found the theatre quite in readiness for me. Scenery, drops, and curtain, everything, in short, was there excepting the foot-lights, for which the sun was an admirable substitute.

The public were to be admitted at one, and though I was not to give my performance till nearly four o'clock, all my preparations were made by the time the

doors opened. The lady patronesses were already at their posts to receive the Queen and the royal family, and were assisted by stewards selected from the highest members of the aristocracy; among them being the Duke of Beaufort, the Marquis of Abercorn, the Marquis of Douglas, &c.

While waiting my turn to act, I thought I might as well take part in the fête as a simple spectator; hence I went first to the entrance gates.

I had scarce reached them when I saw the Duke of Wellington get out of his carriage, the popular hero before whom gentle and simple bowed with respectful deference.

A few moments later appeared the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, accompanied by his Highness Prince Frederick William of Hesse, and in a group immediately following these high personages, the Duchess of Kent, the Duchess Bernhard of Saxe Weimar, and the Princesses Anne and Amelia were pointed out to me.

These illustrious visitors were received by the lady patronesses with the honours due to their rank, while the band of the Royal Horse Guards played national airs.

Outside could be heard the noisy and animated crowd, pressing forward, at the risk of their lives, to see the carriages with the powdered and gorgeous footmen whose heads are taxed so highly by the government.

The numerous subscribers flocked in: all wished to be punctual, for it was known the Queen would grace the fête by her presence, and an Englishman, great or small, would not at any price miss the pleasure of seeing once again the features of her most gracious Majesty.

The place I had selected was most favourable for observing the new arrivals and not missing a single person. Still, whatever attraction this brilliant panorama might offer me, I was equally anxious to see the interior of the fairy palace, and I was just turning away, after directing a parting glance to the entrance gates. I was glad I did so, for at this moment arrived, close after each other, Prince Louis Napoleon, our present Emperor; Prince Edward of Saxe Weimar; Prince Lœwenstein, and several other great personages whose names have escaped my memory.

The gardens, the conservatories, and apartments, were already crowded by all the rank and fashion of

London, and it was a hard matter to move about at one's ease. At each moment a formidable swarm of marchionesses and ladies stopped the way, and forced me to yield the road to them, in my fear of crushing the most dazzling dresses I had ever seen. This was difficult enough, for whatever way I might turn in my politeness, I ran the risk of finding myself in the same dilemma, so numerous and compact was the assemblage at Fulham.

At half-past two the Queen had not yet arrived, and there was a hesitation about waiting any longer, when frenzied hurrahs, rending the air for the length of a mile, announced her Majesty's speedy arrival.

The church-bells immediately began ringing, the band struck up "God save the Queen," while the youngest and fairest ladies formed a double avenue along her Majesty's route.

These preparations were scarce made ere the Queen left her carriage, and moving along an immense avenue, covered with red cloth, and sheltered overhead by a gay awning, she walked towards the room where her arrival was only awaited to commence the concert.

On reaching the room, the Queen took her place in

the midst of a circle formed by the lady patronesses, and the concert began.

I should have gladly listened to the dulcet sounds, but, unfortunately, the hall, in spite of its vast proportions, could not contain all the spectators, and the crush was so great that it was not only crowded, but the approaches were invaded to the point where the vibration of the voices finally died away.

Hence, I was obliged to content myself with hearing outside the repeated applause bestowed on the talented singers. Roger, especially, obtained a real triumph by his aria from Lucia di Lammermoor, and the exquisite way in which he sings it is well known. The Queen herself commanded an encore.

The concert was scarcely over when, in accordance with the programme, the Queen proceeded to see the quadrilles, in which magnificently attired ladies were to take part.

I should have gladly witnessed this graceful sight, but I thought it advisable to cast a final glance on my stage. Hence, I proceeded towards the theatre, where a private entrance had been prepared for me, and I was just going up the few steps leading to it, when some one seized my arm.

"Ah! Monsieur Robert-Houdin," a gentleman said to me, with a smile, as he prepared to follow me up the stairs, "that is capital—we will go in together."

"Where, sir?" I asked, much surprised at this proposal.

"Why, on your stage," the unknown said, with an air of authority; "and I trust you will not refuse me that pleasure."

"I am vexed to deny you, sir; but that is impossible," I said politely, knowing that in these grounds I could only meet persons who must be treated with respect.

"Why so?" the gentleman continued, most pressingly. "I find, on the contrary, nothing easier. If we cannot go in side by side, we can follow each other."

"Pardon me, sir, if I refuse your request; but no stranger is allowed on my stage."

"Very good," my assailant then said, pleasantly; "if that is the case, I will tell you my name, so that I may be no longer a 'stranger' to you. I am Baron Brunnow, the Russian ambassador, as great an admirer of your mysteries as I am desirous to find them out." And he continued his ascent, while striving to

force the barrier. "What, Monsieur Robert-Houdin," he added, "do you still refuse me this? I only ask one or two explanations, nothing more."

"I must persist in my refusal, Monsieur le Baron, for several reasons, and, more especially, for this one——"

"What?"

"Your perspicuity and talent are so universally recognised, that I would not deprive you of the pleasure of yourself detecting these secrets, which are hardly worthy your powerful intellect."

"Ah! ah!" the Baron replied, with a laugh, "how diplomatic we are. Do you wish to follow in my track?"

"I am unworthy to do so, Monsieur le Baron."

"Very good, very good. In the mean while, I am repulsed with loss, and forced to take my place among the spectators. I yield; but tell me, Monsieur Robert-Houdin, have you ever been in Russia?"

"No, sir, never."

"Then give me your card."

And the ambassador wrote his name below mine.

"Here," he said, handing it me back, "if you ever feel an inclination to visit our country, that card will

be very useful to you; and, if I happen to be at St. Petersburg at the time, come and see me, and I will procure you the honour of performing before his Majesty the Emperor Nicholas."

I thanked Baron Brunnow, and he left me.

During this conversation the quadrilles were being danced, and, before their termination, the crowd had occupied all the seats for my performance, save those reserved for the royal family and the court. The Queen herself soon arrived, and I immediately received orders to begin.

Would that I had a more skilful pen with which to depict in its true colours the picture which revealed itself to my dazzled gaze at this moment! At any rate, I will attempt to describe it.

Imagine a large lawn rising before me in an amphitheatrical shape, and arranged like the pit of a theatre. It would have been impossible to say whether the ground was covered with grass or gravel, so thronged was it with ladies, who were alone allowed to sit down.

In the first row and nearest my theatre, the Queen, having her royal husband on her right, was surrounded by her young and graceful family. A little in the

rear the ladies in waiting and the lady patronesses formed the royal escort. At a respectful distance behind, the wives and daughters of the subscribers took their places, while the gentlemen formed symmetrical groups round this vast space.

The sight was truly magnificent; all the ladies, dazzling with youth and beauty, covered with diamonds and flowers, and rivalling each other in good taste and brilliancy, resembled a vast enamelled prairie, on which the richest flowers of spring were displayed, while the black coats of the gentlemen who enframed this smiling picture, far from dulling it, only heightened the effect.

On either side of the lawn, old oak-trees lent their refreshing shade to this improvised theatre.

I felt a noble pride at that moment, when I thought I held, as it were at my fingers' ends, the witching eyes of duchesses, at times so haughty, but now so gracious, and which seemed at every moment to gain fresh brilliancy at the sight of the surprises I offered them.

In this unique performance the time passed so rapidly, that I was quite astonished when I found myself performing my last trick.

Before leaving her seat, the Queen, although she had several times evinced her satisfaction, sent me her compliments through an aide-de-camp, who also expressed her Majesty's desire to have a performance at Buckingham Palace at a later date.

I had made every arrangement to start for town immediately my performance was over, lest I might be delayed by the carriages waiting at the park gates. An idea of the number of my audience can be formed, when I say it took me more than a quarter of an hour to pass through the carriages drawn up in double file along the road. The receipts of the festival will supply a better proof: they amounted to 2500*l.*!

The next day the royal arms appeared at the head of my bills, and below, the following passage, as a species of baptismal certificate:

"*Robert-Houdin, who has had the honour of performing before her most gracious Majesty the Queen, Prince Albert, the Royal Family, and the Nobility of the United Kingdom*," &c.

My fashion only became the greater at St. James's.

We had now reached the middle of July, and no one but an Englishman can understand the possibility of obtaining a theatrical success during the dog-day

heats. I must say, then, that among our brethren beyond Channel, where all our customs are inverted, the season for concerts is from May to the end of August. In September the aristocracy retire to their estates, where they remain the other six months of the year.

I followed the example of my audience: I quitted London at the beginning of September, not like them to take rest, but, on the contrary, to commence a life even more agitated than the one I was leaving. I went to the Manchester Theatre, where Knowles, the manager, had made an engagement with me for fifteen performances.

The theatre in this city is immense; like the vast *arenæ* of ancient Rome, it can hold an entire people. To give an idea of its size, I need only say that twelve hundred spectators scarcely filled the pit.

When I took possession of the stage, I was startled at its huge proportions; for I feared I should be lost upon it, and my voice be unheard.

The reasons for the erection of this immense building were explained to me afterwards.

Manchester, as an eminent manufacturing city, counts its workmen by thousands. Well, these hardy artisans

are all fond of the stage, and in their hand-to-mouth existence they often give up one or two nights a week to this style of amusement; hence a large space was required to house them all.

Judging by the size of the house, I saw that many of the tricks I performed at St. James's were unsuited for the Manchester Theatre; hence, I was obliged to draw up a programme containing merely tricks that could be seen from a distance, and whose effect would strike the masses.

So soon as my performances were announced, the "hands" flocked in in shoals, and the pit, their favourite place, was literally crammed; while the rest of the house was nearly empty. This is, however, generally the case at a first performance in England; for many people wait for the newspaper critiques, which are sure to appear on the following day, ere they make up their mind.

The audience entered the house with a noise unexampled in any French theatre, except at those gratuitous performances given in Paris on grand occasions. Before the curtain was raised, I was obliged to wait, and give my noisy public time to cool down, and order and silence being gradually established, I began my performance.

Instead of the fashionable world, the elegant toilettes, and those spectators who seemed to spread an aristocratic perfume over the St. James's Theatre, I now found myself in the presence of simple workmen, modestly and uniformly attired, rough in their manner, and eager for amusement.

But this change, far from displeasing me, stimulated my energies and dash, and I was soon at my ease with my new spectators, when I saw that they took a lively interest in my experiments. Still, an accident at the outset nearly aroused the popular dissatisfaction.

The Manchester artisans, far from coming to my performances to improve their French accent, were greatly surprised at hearing themselves addressed in any language but their own. Protests were put in on every side, and soon shouts were heard of "Speak English!"

As for my complying with the request, it was simply impossible; for though I had been six months in London, as I was always among my own countrymen, or persons who talked French, I had no occasion to apply myself to the English language. Still, I tried to satisfy a claim that appeared to me legitimate, and make up for my deficiencies by boldness and good-will.

I began by pronouncing the few English words I knew; when my vocabulary was at fault, and I was about to run short, I invented expressions which, owing to their strange shape, greatly amused my audience. Often, too, when in a difficulty, I boldly asked them to come to my aid, and it was my turn to feel a great inclination to laugh.

"How do you call it?" I said, with a serio-comic air, as I held up the article whose name I wished to know; and straightway a hundred voices responded to my appeal. Nothing could be more pleasant than a lesson thus taken, when my teachers, contrary to the usual fashion, paid for the privilege of giving it.

Through my condescension I succeeded in making peace with my audience, who warmly cemented it on several occasions by their hearty applause. The last trick especially created a tremendous excitement—I mean the *inexhaustible bottle*, produced with scenery and decorations never before witnessed on any stage.

The picture presented by this trick is indescribable, and a skilful pencil could alone reproduce its numerous details. Here, however, is a sketch as accurate as possible:

I have already said that although the spectators were

few and far between in some parts of the house, the pit was crowded, and it consequently contained more than twelve hundred persons.

I own it was a really curious sight to see all these heads issuing invariably from dark-coloured waistcoats, heightened by that ruddiness of face which can be only produced by the beef and porter of Great Britain.

In order that I might communicate more freely with my numerous spectators, the machinist had put up a plank running from the stage to the end of the pit, and as I also wished to address persons at the sides, two other "practicables," much shorter than the centre one, ran across to the boxes. The latter did not occupy room like the first, for they were just over a passage, while those who entered by it had to stoop down to reach their seats; but what was that slight inconvenience to the pleasure they promised themselves in seeing the "French conjuror?"

The public were still entering the pit after my performance had commenced, and so many persons were allowed to come in that there was soon no room for the laggards.

Several of them had the courage to remain bent under the "practicables," and, looking out right and left

in turn, they could follow my tricks. But one of these bold spectators, doubtlessly fatigued by the inconvenient posture he was obliged to keep, ingeniously passed his head through the narrow space between the "practicable" and the boxes. He managed it very cleverly, and his action was precisely that of a button going into its corresponding hole.

This innovation was, it may be easily supposed, gaily and noisily welcomed by the audience, and the unfortunate man had to endure the fate reserved for all innovators—he was laughed at and "chaffed" tremendously. But he did not trouble himself about that, and his coolness disarmed his opponents.

Encouraged by his example, a neighbour tried the button-hole manœuvre, then a second and a third, and thus, by the middle of the performance, half a dozen heads without bodies were symmetrically arranged on either side the pit, looking for all the world like skittle-pins waiting to be knocked down.

I had arrived at the bottle trick, which consists in producing from an empty bottle every liquor that may be asked for, no matter the number of drinkers.

The reputation of this famous bottle was already established in Manchester, for the London papers had

fully described the experiment. Hence, a general hurrah was heard when I appeared armed with my marvellous bottle; for, in addition to the merit of the trick itself, the workmen also counted on the pleasure of drinking a glass of brandy, or any other liquor.

Flattered by this reception, I proceeded to the centre of the pit, followed by my servant, who carried an enormous tray of wine-glasses. But I had scarce arrived there when a thousand voices began exclaiming, "Brandy, whisky, gin, curaçoa, shrub, rum," &c.

It was impossible to satisfy all at once; hence, I wished to proceed in rotation, and, after filling a glass, I offered it to the man who I thought had made the first claim; but the gentleman was utterly disappointed. Twenty hands were stretched out to dispute the precious liquor, and the glass was speedily upset. The spectators, suffering the punishment of Tantalus, shouted for the liquid, which was not fated to reach their lips. I filled a second glass—it shared the fate of the previous one, and was fought for so obstinately that the glass was broken.

Further on, the same request was made; I complied, and none could profit by it.

Without troubling myself as to the result, I poured

out the liquor profusely, and left my audience to fight for its possession.

Soon all the glasses had disappeared, and in vain I asked for them back to continue my bounty; not a trace of them was to be found. My experiment was, therefore, in danger of sudden termination, when a clever spectator held out his hand in the shape of a cup.

The process was as simple as it was ingenious; it was the egg of Christopher Columbus. The astonishment his neighbours felt permitted the inventor to profit by his discovery, which is unfortunately a rarity.

This improvised cup was unanimously accepted, but the imitators saw their piracy suffer the same fate, minus the breakage, as the glasses.

Quite tired, I was about to withdraw, when a new improvement was introduced by a spectator, as thirsty as he was obstinate; throwing back his head and opening an enormous mouth, he made me signs to pour in curaçoa. Finding the idea original, I immediately complied.

"What capital curaçoa," the man said, as he licked his lips.

This seductive exclamation was scarce heard ere every mouth was open and heads thrown back; it was enough to make me fly in terror. Still, not to leave so curious a scene incomplete, I took a watering tour, holding the mouth of the bottle as straight as I could. At times, the bottle being pushed by the neighbours, sent the liquor over a man's coat, but, save this slight inconvenience, all went on famously, and I fancied I had fulfilled the rude task of quenching the thirst of my audience. Still, I heard a few more appeals; and a glass of whisky was earnestly implored by one of the men who had thrust his head between the plank and the boxes, and seemed in a perfect state of collapse.

My son, who helped me on the stage, and was one of the first to hear this request, understood all the longing the poor suppliant felt; hence he ran on the stage for a glass, which I filled, and he carried to the man.

But a difficulty suddenly arose; the claimant and his comrades were shut up in their pillory, side by side, and could not raise their arms. My son, unthinkingly, offered the glass, and seeing no one take it, was about to carry it back on the stage; but a groan made him turn round, and, by the patient's air, he understood he

was begging him to stoop down and place the glass to his lips.

This delicate operation was performed with considerable skill on both sides, and, despite the laughter of the public, each of the pilloried men asked the same service in turn.

This little scene appeared to have calmed the ardour of the public; and I thought it possible to terminate my trick in the usual way. When my bottle appears exhausted, I end by filling an enormous glass with liquor, but a scene then began which I had been far from expecting.

Many writers have described the saturnalia produced by the frightful distribution of food and wine at the Restoration. Well, these orgies were respectable meals compared with the assault attempted to reach the glass I held in my hand.

A human avalanche suddenly rose before me, and from this living pyramid emerged two hundred hands to dispute their prey, while a hundred mouths were opened to swallow it.

I thought it high time to beat a retreat, in the fear of being buried beneath this shapeless mass. It was

impossible; behind me a file of thirsty drinkers barred my passage.

The danger was pressing, for the pyramid was bending forward to reach me, and might lose its balance at any moment; the cries of the unhappy beings supporting its weight explained the dangerous position in which I might soon find myself; hence, I rushed with my head down through the mass, and reached the stage in time to notice the curious sight of a falling mountain.

I will not attempt to describe the cries, shouts, and applauses that accompanied this fall, while the victims were loud in their abuse, and found no way of getting up, save by stepping on their companions in misfortune. The noise was atrocious.

The curtain fell on this strange scene, but shouts and clapping were immediately heard: "The conjuror!" Houdin must come out to be complimented.

I obeyed this order, and when I made my appearance, either because I had been too liberal with my bottle, or because, as I would sooner think, my spectators were satisfied with my performance, the shouts and applause broke out in such a formidable manner that I was quite stupified, while feeling acutely the

pleasure they produced me. For I must say that the noise of the hands struck together, though so trying in itself, has nothing to shock the ear of a performer; on the contrary, the more deafening it becomes, the more harmonious it appears to the recipient.

The following performances were far from being so tumultuous as the first, and the reason is very simple. The merchants and traders, who form the aristocracy of Manchester, having heard of my performances, came with their families to witness them, and their presence contributed to keep the workmen in order. The house assumed a different aspect, and henceforth I could only praise the quietness of the pit.

Fifteen consecutive performances had not exhausted the curiosity of the inhabitants, and I could certainly have given fifteen more, at least, when, to my great regret, I was obliged to make way for two celebrities—Jenny Lind and Roger—whom Knowles had engaged to follow my performance.

Though I felt vexed at throwing such a chance away, on the other hand I was glad to escape as soon as possible from that heavy and smoky atmosphere, which makes the industrial capital of England resemble a city of chimney-sweeps. I could not accus-

tom my lungs to inhale, instead of air, the flakes of soot constantly floating about. I fell into a state of melancholy almost akin to spleen, which did not abandon me till I reached the gay city of Liverpool, where I intended to remain several weeks.

I was at that time at the height of my fashion; my performances began with applause and ended with famous receipts. I need only add, that, after performing in turn at the theatres of Liverpool, Birmingham, Worcester, Cheltenham, Bristol, and Exeter, I returned to London to give fifteen performances ere I started for France.

A few days after my return to St. James's Theatre, the Queen, bearing in mind the desire she had expressed at Fulham, commanded a performance at Buckingham Palace.

This invitation being most agreeable, I willingly accepted it.

At eight in the morning of the appointed day, I proceeded to the royal residence, and the steward of the palace, to whom I was directed, led me to the place selected for my performance. It was a long and magnificent picture-gallery, and a theatre had been put up, on which the scenery represented a saloon in the

Louis Quinze style, white and gold, much resembling the one I had at St. James's Theatre.

My guide then showed me an adjoining dining-room, belonging, he said, to the ladies of honour, and he begged me to state at what hour I should like to breakfast.

I was too busy to think about eating, for I had my performance to prepare; however, I ordered the meal for one o'clock at any risk, and set to work directly.

Aided by my secretary (a species of factotum) and my two boys, who helped me as well as their strength permitted, I managed to overcome all the difficulties produced by the provisional arrangement of the stage. But I had not finished all my preparations till two o'clock, and I was almost dying of inanition, for, less fortunate than my companions, I had eaten nothing the whole day. Hence it was with real joy I led the route to the dining-room.

As the performance was not to take place till three, I had just an hour to recruit my strength.

I had scarce walked a dozen steps, when I heard some one calling me. It was a palace official who wanted to speak to me.

"There will be a ball, sir, in this gallery," he said, in excellent French, "after your performance, and consequently preparations will have to be made which may take more time than has been allowed for them. Hence, the Queen requests you to begin your performance an hour sooner; she is quite ready, and will be here directly."

"I am very sorry I cannot obey her Majesty's commands," I replied; "my preparations are not yet ended, and I must add, that——"

"Monsieur Robert-Houdin," the officer replied, politely, but with all the coolness of a Briton, "such are her Majesty's orders, and I can say no more." And without awaiting any explanation, he bowed to me and retired.

"We shall still have time to take a hasty snack," I said to my secretary, "so off to the dining-room as quickly as you please."

I had not finished the sentence, when the Queen, Prince Albert, and the royal family entered the gallery, followed by a numerous suite.

At this sight, I had not the courage to go further; I returned, and armed myself with resignation. Protected by the curtain that concealed me from the

spectators, I hastily made my few remaining preparations, and five minutes later I received the order to begin.

When the curtain rose, I was dazzled at the sight that met my gaze.

Her Majesty, the Prince Consort, the Queen Dowager, the Duke of Cambridge, and the royal children occupied the first rank. Behind them were a portion of the Orleans family; while in the rear sat the highest functionaries, among whom I recognised ambassadors dressed in their national costumes, and general officers covered with brilliant decorations. All the ladies were in ball toilette, and richly adorned with jewels.

A wonderful change came over me when I began my performance: all my languor had been suddenly dispelled, and I felt in excellent spirits.

Still this change can be easily explained. It is well known that a performer feels no suffering while on the stage; a species of exaltation suspends all feelings foreign to his part, and hunger, thirst, cold, or heat, even illness itself, is forced to retreat in the presence of this excitement, though it takes its revenge afterwards.

This slight digression was necessary to explain the

spirits I felt in when I appeared before my noble audience.

Never, I believe, did I throw such dash and boldness into the performance of my experiments; never, either, had I an audience which appreciated them so kindly.

The Queen deigned to encourage me several times by flattering remarks, while Prince Albert, ever so kind to professionals, heartily clapped his hands.

I had prepared a trick, called the *Bouquet à la Reine*. This is what the *Court Journal* says of it when describing my performance:

* * * * * *

"The Queen evinced an extreme pleasure in these experiments; but the one which seemed to strike her most was the *Bouquet à la Reine*, a very graceful surprise, and charmingly à propos. Her Majesty having lent her glove to M. Robert-Houdin, the latter immediately produced from it a bouquet, which soon grew so large that it could be scarcely held in both hands. Finally, this bouquet, after being placed in a vase, and bedewed with magic water, was transformed into a garland, in which the flowers formed the word VICTORIA.

"The Queen was equally astonished at the surprising lucidity of M. Robert-Houdin's son, in the experiment of the second sight. The most complicated objects had been prepared in order to embarrass and foil the sagacity of the father and the marvellous faculty of the son. Both emerged victoriously from this intellectual combat, and defeated every scheme."

After the performance, the same officer with whom I had already spoken came to offer me the thanks of the Queen and Prince Albert. The Duchess of Orleans had also been kind enough to add her compliments and those of her family.

So soon as the curtain had fallen, and I was no longer supported by the presence of my audience, I felt ready to drop. I had taken a seat, and could hardly rise to go and enjoy the meal which I stood in such need of.

Still, I was about to do so, when I was roused from my exhaustion by the appearance of a large body of workmen, who had come to take down the theatre in all speed and prepare the gallery for the ball.

My readers can judge of my embarrassment and trouble when I found I must pack up all my machinery at once, lest it might be broken.

I tried to protest and defer the execution of the task, but it was all in vain: orders had been given, and they must be obeyed. Hence, I was obliged to summon up fresh energy to finish my packing, which took me an hour and a half.

Six o'clock struck when all was finished. I had taken no food for exactly four-and-twenty hours.

Leaning on my manager, who had taken the precaution of ordering up the dinner, I dragged myself as far as the dining-room.

Twilight had commenced, and the room was not yet lighted, and it was with some difficulty we could distinguish a table. I fell rather than sat down upon a chair I found near me, and while my son was ringing for lights, I commenced a second sight performance of my own. I succeeded famously; I laid my hand on a fork, and pricking at whatever might be before me, found something attached to the instrument. I prudently raised the object to my nose, and, satisfied with this inspection, I took a triumphant bite.

It was delicious; and I fancied I could recognise a *salmi* of partridge.

I made a second exploring tour to assure myself of

the truth, and, after a few mouthfuls, I convinced myself I was not mistaken. My manager and boys followed my example, and set to work manfully.

It seems that the attendance must be slow in royal houses, for before the lights arrived we had plenty of time to grow used to the darkness.

However, this meal, through its originality, became a delightful amusement, and I had seized a bottle to pour out some wine, when the door of the room suddenly opened, and two servants came in bearing candelabra. On seeing us thus seated at table and eating in the coolest way, they nearly fell backwards in surprise. I am persuaded they took us at the moment for real sorcerers, for we had great difficulty in inducing them to remain in the room and wait on us.

We then took our ease. The table was well served, the wines were excellent, and we could rest from the fatigues and emotions of the day. At the end of the dinner the palace steward paid us a visit, and on hearing of my misfortunes, he expressed his deep regret. The Queen, he assured me, would be the more vexed, if she heard of it, because she had given

the strictest orders that I should want for nothing in her palace.

I replied, that I was amply repaid for a few moments of pain by the satisfaction I felt at having been called to perform before his gracious sovereign. And this was, indeed, the truth.

CHAPTER VI.

An optimist Manager—Three Spectators in a Room—A magical Collation—The Colchester Public and the Nuts—I return to France—I give up my Theatre—A Farewell Tour—I retire to St. Gervais—An Academician's Predictions.

A SHORT time after this performance my engagement with Mitchell terminated.

Instead of returning to France, as I should much have desired after so lengthened an absence, I thought it better to continue my excursions in the English provinces till the end of September, when I hoped to reopen my theatre at Paris.

Consequently, I drew up an itinerary, in which the first station would be Cambridge, celebrated for its university; and set out.

Possibly the reader may feel no inclination to follow me on this tour, but he may be assured I will not drag him after me, especially as my second passage

through England presents hardly any details worth mentioning here. I will content myself with recounting a few incidents, and among them a small adventure that happened to me, as it may serve for a lesson to all professionals, that it is dangerous both to their self-esteem and interests to drain public curiosity too deep in the various places whither the hope of good receipts attracts them.

I intended to go straight from London to Cambridge, but, half way, I took a fancy to stop and give a few performances at Hertford, a town containing some ten thousand people.

My two first performances were most successful, but on the third, seeing that the number of spectators had greatly fallen off, I decided on giving no more.

My manager argued against this resolution, and offered me reasons which certainly had some value.

"I assure you, sir," he said, "that nothing is spoken of in the town but your performance. Every one is asking if you are going to perform to-morrow, and two young gentlemen have already begged me to keep them places if you intend to remain for to-morrow."

Génet, my manager, was certainly the best fellow in the world; but I ought to have distrusted his

counsels, knowing, as I did, his disposition to look at the bright side of everything. He was the incarnation of optimism, and the calculations he made about this performance went far beyond those of the inkstand inventor. To hear him talk, we should have to double the price of places, and increase our staff to keep back the crowd that would rush to see me.

While jesting Génet on his exaggerated ideas, I still allowed him to send out the bills for the performance he so much desired.

The next evening, at half-past seven, I went, according to my usual custom, to order the box-office to be opened, and the public allowed admission. The performance would commence at eight precisely.

I found my manager quite alone—not a soul had arrived yet. Still, that did not prevent him greeting me with a radiant air—though that was his normal condition.

"No one has yet come to the theatre," he said, rubbing his hands, as if giving me first-rate intelligence; "but that is a good sign."

"The deuce it is! Come, my dear Génet, I must have that proved."

"It is easy enough to understand. You must have

noticed, sir, that at our former performances we only had the country gentry."

"Nothing proves it was so; still, I will allow it. Now go on."

"Well, it is very simple. The tradespeople have not come to see you yet, and I expect them to-night. They are always so busy, that they usually defer a pleasure till the last moment. Have patience, and you will soon see the rush we shall have to contend against."

And he looked towards the entrance door like a man perfectly convinced that his predictions would be fulfilled.

We had still half an hour—more than sufficient to fill the room—so I waited. But this half-hour passed in vain expectation. Not a soul came to the box-office.

"It is now eight," I said, drawing out my watch, "and no spectators have arrived. What do you say to that, Génet?"

"Oh, sir! your watch is too fast—I am sure of it, for——"

My manager was about to support his allegation by some proof drawn from his brain, when the town-hall clock struck. Génet, finding his reasons exhausted,

contented himself with silence, while casting a despairing glance towards the door.

At length, I saw his face grow purple with delight.

"Ah! I said so," he exclaimed, pointing to two young men coming towards us. "The public are beginning to arrive. They doubtlessly mistook the hour. Come, every man to his post!"

Génet's joy did not last long, for he soon recognised in these visitors the two young gentlemen who had taken their places the previous day.

"You have kept our seats?" they said to the optimist, as they hurried in.

"Yes, gentlemen—yes; you can go in," Génet replied, making an imperceptible grimace. And he led them in complacently, while striving to explain the emptiness of the room by saying it was only momentary. He had hardly returned to the box-office, when a gentleman of a certain age hurried up the steps, and rushed towards the pay place with a haste my previous success probably justified.

"Is there any room left?" he asked, in a panting voice.

My poor Génet did not know how to reply to this question, which seemed a jest; he, therefore,

merely muttered one of those common-place phrases usually employed to gain time.

"Well, sir, to tell you the truth—I should say——"

"I know—I know: there are no places left. I expected it. But be kind enough to let me go in, and I will find some corner to stand in."

"But, sir, allow me to tell you——"

"No matter."

"But if, on the contrary——"

"All the better. There, give me a stall-ticket, and I will see if I can find room in the passage."

Being at the end of his arguments, Génet supplied the ticket.

You can imagine the surprise of the eager visitor when, on entering the house, he found that he formed in his own person exactly a third of the audience.

For my own part, I soon made up my mind. After compounding with my conscience, by granting the usual quarter of an hour's grace to the laggards, and seeing no one come, I informed my three spectators that, being only anxious to be agreeable to them, I would perform.

This unexpected news produced a triple hurrah in the house in the shape of thanks.

My orchestra consisted of eight amateurs of the town; and these gentlemen, as a compliment to my French origin, always played as overture the "Girondins" and the "Marseillaise," with the assistance of the big drum, and never failed to terminate the performance with "God save the Queen."

The patriotic introduction over, I began my performance.

My audience were collected on the first row of stalls, so that, in order to address my explanations to them, I should have had to keep my head constantly down, which would have eventually become troublesome. Hence I determined to look round the house, and address the benches just as if they were well covered.

For their part, my audience made all possible row to prove their satisfaction. They stamped, applauded, shouted, so as almost to make me believe the house full.

The whole performance was a mutual exchange of compliments, and the spectators saw the last of my tricks arrive with considerable regret. This, however, was not announced on my bills, for I reserved it as the best of my surprises.

"Gentlemen," I said to my audience, "as I require

three persons to assist me in performing this trick, will any gentlemen present have the kindness to come on the stage?"

At this comic invitation the public rose *en masse*, and obligingly placed themselves at my disposal.

After my three assistants had promised to stand at the front of the stage and not look round, I gave each an empty glass, announcing that it would be filled with excellent punch so soon as they expressed the wish, and I added that, to facilitate the performance, they must repeat after me a few cabalistic words borrowed from the enchanter Merlin.

This jest was only proposed in order to gain time, for while we were performing it with bursts of laughter, a change was being carried out behind my kind assistants. The table on which I did my tricks had been removed, and another brought forward on which an excellent supper was spread, and a bowl of punch crackled in the centre.

Génet, clothed in black and a white cravat, and armed with a spoon, was stimulating a spectral flame, and when my assistants expressed a wish to see their glasses filled with punch, he said, in his most solemn voice,

"Turn round, and your wishes will be accomplished."

My musicians had been spectators of this little scene, so I begged them to join us and try the virtues of my inexhaustible bowl. This invitation was joyfully accepted, the table was surrounded, the glasses were filled and emptied, and we passed two agreeable hours in performing this experiment.

Owing to the prodigality of my "inexhaustible bowl of punch," my guests were all affected by a tender expansion. They almost embraced on parting; however, they contented themselves with shaking hands and vowing an undying friendship.

The instruction to be drawn from this anecdote is that, in offering a farewell to the public, you should not wait till there are none left to receive it.

On leaving Hertford, I went to Cambridge, thence to Bury St. Edmunds, Ipswich, and Colchester, always taking receipts proportionate to the importance of the towns. I have only three souvenirs of those five towns: the failure at Hertford, the enthusiastic reception from the Cambridge students, and the nuts at Colchester.

But, it will be asked, what connexion can there be

between nuts and a magical performance. A word will explain the fact to the reader, and all the tribulations this fruit caused me.

It is the custom at Colchester that when a body goes to the theatre he fills his pocket with nuts. These are cracked and eaten during the performance as a species of refreshment. Men and women both suffer from this cracking mania, so that a rolling fire is kept up through the house, often powerful enough to drown the voice.

Nothing affected my nerves so much as this incessant cracking; my first performance suffered from it, and despite my efforts to master myself, I went through the whole performance in a state of irritation. I consented, however, to perform a second time, but the manager could not induce me to promise a third. Although he assured me that his actors had grown quite accustomed to this strange music, and that even a minor actor might often be seen on the stage calmly cracking a nut while awaiting the reply, I could not stand it any longer, and left the town.*

* It would not have been surprising in this oysterous, boisterous town (as Hook christened it) to find M. Houdin astonishing the natives, but the contrary, it appears, took place: the natives decidedly astonished him.

Most assuredly, the theatres in the smaller English towns are not equal to those in the cities.

At Colchester my tour was to end, and I was about starting for France, when Knowles, the Manchester director, remembering my success at his theatre, proposed to me to take a trip with him through Ireland and Scotland. We had then reached the month of June, 1849, when Paris was more than ever agitated by political questions; and theatres only existed in France as memorials of the past. I did not waste much time in forming a decision; I started with my English manager.

Our excursion lasted no less than four months, and I did not step on French soil again till the end of October.

Need I describe the delight with which I presented myself once more before a Parisian audience, whose kind patronage I had not forgotten? Those professional men who, like myself, have been long absent from Paris, will understand it, for they know nothing is so sweet to the heart as the applause given by a man's fellow-citizens.

Unfortunately, when I recommenced my performances, I noticed with sorrow the change which had taken place in my health: the performances which I

formerly went through with no fatigue, now caused me a painful state of exhaustion.

It was easy to find a reason for this disagreeable change; fatigue, the incessant thought connected with my performances, and still more the foggy atmosphere of England, had exhausted my strength. My life had been in some degree used up during my emigration. I should require a lengthened rest to restore it, and I could not think of it at this period, the best part of the season. I could only take precautions for the future, in case I should find myself suddenly compelled by my health to stop; so I decided on educating a pupil to take my place in case of need, and whose labour might assist me in the mean while.

A young man of pleasing exterior, and whose talent I was acquainted with, seemed to offer the conditions I required. My proposals suited him, and he immediately joined me. The future sleight-of-hand professor evinced great aptitude and zeal in learning my lessons. I employed him in a short time to prepare my experiments, then he aided me in the management of my theatre, and when the summer of 1850 arrived, instead of closing my rooms as usual, I continued to send out my bills; the only change was that Hamilton's name was substituted for mine.

Considering his short period of study, my provisional substitute could not be yet very expert; still, he pleased, and the public were satisfied. During this period I enjoyed in the country a repose that had been long desired.

A man who has made a long journey never feels the fatigue so acutely as when he proposes to continue his journey after a few moments of rest. This was what I experienced when, my holiday being ended, I was obliged to leave the country to begin again the feverish existence of a theatre. I never felt such lassitude; never had I a greater desire to enjoy perfect liberty, to renounce those fatigues of an appointed hour, which may be justly called the collar of misery.

At this word, I see many of my readers start. "Why," they will say, "thus call a labour whose object is to astonish an audience, and the result to gain honour and profit?"

I find myself compelled to prove the justice of the expression.

The reader will easily understand that the fatigue, preoccupation, and responsibility attached to a magical performance do not prevent the conjuror being subjected to the ordinary sufferings of humanity. Now, whatever may be the nature of his sufferings or his

grief, he must, at an appointed hour each night, hide them in his bosom, and assume the mask of happiness and health.

This is, in itself, a painful task, but, believe me, reader, it is not all; he must—and this is applicable to all professionals—under penalty of ruin, enliven, animate, and excite the public, or, in other words, give them pleasure for their money.

Can this be always equally easy? In truth, the position artists hold would be intolerable, did not they find in the sympathy and applause of the public a gentle recompense which makes them forget the minor miseries of life.

I may say it with pride, to the last moment of my artist life I only met with sympathy and kindness; but the more I strove to render myself ever worthy of them, the more I felt my strength failing me, and the more, too, increased my desire to live in retirement and freedom.

At last, in January, 1852, judging Hamilton fit to succeed me, I decided on giving up my establishment to him, and in order that my theatre, the fruit of my labours, might remain in the family, two contracts

were signed; and on the same day my pupil became my brother-in-law and my successor.

Still, however desirous an actor may be of retiring into private life, he very rarely renounces at once and for ever the applause which has become an agreeable stimulant for him. Hence, no surprise will be felt on learning that, after a few months' rest, I proposed to give a few more performances, as a final parting from the public.

As I had not yet visited Germany, I proceeded to the banks of the Rhine. Desiring no unnecessary fatigue, I resolved to reserve to myself the choice of the places where I would perform. I therefore stopped, in preference, at those festal places called "Baths," and visited in turn Baden, Wiesbaden, Homburg, Aix-la-Chapelle, and Spa. Nearly each of my performances was honoured by the presence of one or more of the princes regnant of the Germanic Confederation.

It was my intention to return to France after my performances at Spa, but, at the request of M. Engel, manager of a theatre at Berlin, I retraced my steps, and started for the capital of Prussia.

I had made a six weeks' engagement with M. Engel;

but my success, and the excellent terms on which I stood with my manager, induced me to prolong it for three months. I could not have taken a more brilliant leave of the public: for, probably, I never saw greater crowds run after my performances. Thus the reception I obtained from the Berliner will ever remain one of my pleasantest reminiscences.

From Berlin I proceeded straight to the neighbourhood of Blois, to the retreat I had selected.

Whatever might be my satisfaction in enjoying the freedom I had so long desired, it would soon have undergone the fate common to all our pleasures, and have grown flat by the mere effect of enjoyment, had I not reserved for these blessed hours of leisure studies in which I hoped to find a perennial source of amusement. After gaining a fortune by labours unjustly regarded as futile, I was about to devote myself to serious researches, as I had been formerly advised by a member of the Institute.

The circumstances to which I allude dates back to the Exposition of 1844, when I submitted my automata and mechanical curiosities.

The jury entrusted with the examination of mechanical instruments and designs had come to my produc-

tions, and I had repeated the little performance I had given a few days previously in the presence of Louis Philippe.

After listening with interest to the details of the numerous difficulties I had to overcome in making my automata, one of the members of the jury said to me:

"It is a great pity, Monsieur Robert-Houdin, that you did not apply the talent you have evinced in fancy objects to serious labours."

This criticism wounded me the more, because at that period I considered nothing superior to my works, and in my fairest dreams of the future I desired no greater glory than that of the skilful inventor of the "automaton duck."

"Sir," I replied, in a tone that betrayed my pique, "I know no works more serious than those which give a man an honest livelihood. Still, I am ready to change my views, if you give me the same advice after you have heard me.

"At the period when I devoted myself to chronometers, I hardly earned enough to live upon; at present, I have four workmen to help me in making my automata; and as the least skilful among them

earns six francs a day, you can easily form an idea what I earn myself.

"Now, sir, I ask you, if I ought to return to my old trade?"

My critic was silent, but another member of the jury coming up to me, said, in a low voice,

"Go on, Monsieur Robert-Houdin—go on; I am convinced that your ingenious works, after leading you to success, will conduct you straight to useful discoveries."

"Monsieur le Baron Séguier," I replied, in the same key, "I thank you for your encouraging prediction, and will do my best to prove its correctness." *

I have followed the advice of the illustrious savant, and find myself all the better for it.

* This slight incident did not prevent the jury granting me a silver medal for my automata. Eleven years later, at the Universal Exhibition of 1855, I received a medal of the first class for new applications of electricity to mechanism.

CHAPTER VII.

Travels in Algeria—Convocation of the Chieftains—Performances before the Arabs—A Kabyle rendered powerless—Invulnerability—A Moor disappears—Panic and Flight of the Audience—Reconciliation—The Sect of the Aïssaoua—Their pretended Miracles.

I HAVE, then, reached the object of all my hopes: I have bidden an eternal farewell to professional life, and from my retirement I wave my hand in parting salutation to my kind and obliging patrons. Henceforth I shall know no care or anxiety; free and tranquil, I am about to devote myself to my peaceful studies, and enjoy the pleasantest existence man ever had on earth.

I was busily forming my plans of happiness, when, one day, I received a letter from Colonel de Neveu, head of the political office at Algiers. This distin-

guished functionary begged me to proceed to our colony, and give my performances before the principal chieftains of the Arab tribes.

This invitation reached me in the full of my honey-moon, if I may employ the expression. Scarce recovered from the fatigues of my journey, I was imbibing deep draughts of happiness, and it would have been a heavy sacrifice to dispel the charm so soon. Hence, I expressed to Colonel de Neveu my regret at not being able to accept his invitation.

The colonel noted down my excuses, and, the following year, reminded me of them. It was in 1855; but I had presented at the Universal Exhibition several new applications of electricity to mechanism, and having learned that the jury considered me worthy a reward, I would not quit Paris till I had received it. Such was, at least, the motive on which I based a new refusal, accompanied by my regret.

But the colonel kept these excuses still in mind, and in June, 1856, he presented them to me like a bill to be met. This time I had exhausted my excuses, and though it cost me much to quit my retreat and brave the caprices of the Mediterranean in the worst month of the year, I decided on going.

It was settled that I should reach Algiers by the next 27th of September, the day on which the great fêtes annually offered by the capital of Algeria to the Arabs would commence.

I must say that I was much influenced in my determination by the knowledge that my mission to Algeria had a quasi-political character. I, a simple conjuror, was proud of being able to render my country a service.

It is known that the majority of revolts which have to be suppressed in Algeria are excited by intriguers, who say they are inspired by the Prophet, and are regarded by the Arabs as envoys of God on earth to deliver them from the oppression of the *Roumi* (Christians).

These false prophets and holy Marabouts, who are no more sorcerers than I am, and indeed even less so, still contrive to influence the fanaticism of their co-religionists by tricks as primitive as are the spectators before whom they are performed.

The government was, therefore, anxious to destroy their pernicious influence, and reckoned on me to do so. They hoped, with reason, by the aid of my experiments, to prove to the Arabs that the tricks of

their Marabouts were mere child's play, and owing to their simplicity could not be done by an envoy from Heaven, which also led us very naturally to show them that we are their superiors in everything, and, as for sorcerers, there are none like the French.

Presently I will show the success obtained by these skilful tactics.

Three months were to elapse between the day of my acceptance and that of my departure, which I employed in arranging a complete arsenal of my best tricks, and left St. Gervais on the 10th of September.

I will give no account of my passage, further than to say no sooner was I at sea than I wished I had arrived, and, after thirty-six hours' navigation, I greeted the capital of our colony with indescribable delight.

I was expected; an officer came off in an elegant boat and took me to the Hôtel d'Orient, where a handsome suite of rooms was retained for me.

The government had behaved nobly, for I was lodged like a prince. From the window of my sitting-room I could survey the roads of Algiers, and the prospect was only bounded by the horizon. The sea is always lovely when seen from a window; thus each

morning I admired it, and pardoned its past slight insults.

From my hotel I also gazed on the magnificent Government-square, planted with orange-trees, such as cannot be seen in France. They were at this season laden with flowers and perfectly ripe fruit.

Mme. Robert-Houdin and myself delighted in sitting beneath their shade at nightfall and eating an ice before the doorway of an Algerian Tortoni, while inhaling the perfumed breeze borne to us from the sea. Next to this pleasure, nothing interested us so much as observing the immense variety of persons moving around us.

The five quarters of the world had sent their representatives to Algeria: there were French, Spaniards, Maltese, Italians, Germans, Swiss, Prussians, Belgians, Portuguese, Poles, Russians, English, and Americans, all forming a portion of the population of Algeria. Add to these the different Arabic types, such as Moors, Kabyles, Koulougly, Biskri, Mozabites, negroes, Arab Jews, &c., and an idea may be formed of the sight unrolled before our eyes.

When I arrived at Algiers, M. de Neveu told me that as a portion of Kabylia had revolted, the marshal-

governor had started with an expeditionary corps to suppress it. In consequence of this, the fêtes to which the Arab chiefs were to be invited were deferred for a month, and my performances put off for the same period.

"I have now to ask you," the colonel added, "if you will sign this new engagement?"

"Mon colonel!" I replied, in a jocular tone, "I consider myself in military employ. As I depend on the governor, I will be faithful to my post, whatever may happen."

"Very good, M. Robert-Houdin," the colonel said, with a laugh; "you behave like a true French soldier, and the colony will owe you thanks for it. At the same time, we will try to make your service in Algeria as light as possible. We have given orders at your hotel that madame and yourself may have no cause to regret the comfort you left to come here." (I have forgotten to say that, in signing my engagement, I stipulated that Mme. Houdin should accompany me.) "If, while awaiting your official performances, you might like to employ your leisure evenings at the town theatre, the governor places it at your service thrice a week, the other days belonging to the operatic company."

This proposition suited me admirably, and I saw three advantages in it: the first, to get my hand in, for I had left the stage for two years; the second, to try the effect of my experiments on the town Arabs; the third, to pocket a very welcome sum of money. I accepted; but when I offered my thanks to M. de Neveu, he said,

"It is our place to thank you, for, by giving performances at Algiers during the Kabylian expedition, you render us a great service."

"How, colonel?"

"By employing the minds of the Algerines, we prevent them speculating on the eventualities of the campaign, which might be very injurious to the government."

"That being so, I will set to work at once."

The colonel started the next day to join the marshal, having previously handed me over to the civil authorities; that is to say, he had introduced me to M. de Guiroye, mayor of the town, who displayed extreme kindness in facilitating the arrangements for my performances.

It might be reasonably supposed that, owing to the high patronage that supported me, I need only follow a path bestrewn with flowers, to use the language of

the poets. But it was not so: I had to endure many annoyances, which might have vexed me greatly, had I not possessed a stock of philosophy beyond ordinary mortals.

M. D——, privileged manager of the Bab-Azoun Theatre, had commenced the season with an operatic company, and, fearing lest the success of a stranger on his stage might injure his own prospects, he complained about it to the authorities.

The mayor could offer him no other consolation than saying the government ordered it. M. D—— protested, and even threatened to throw up the management, but the mayor adhered to his inflexible decision.

The city of Algiers thus suddenly saw itself exposed to a total managerial eclipse, when, through a spirit of conciliation, I offered to perform only twice a week, and defer beginning till the operatic début was over.

This concession slightly calmed the impresario, though it did not gain me his good graces. M. D—— ever maintained a coldness towards me, which evidenced his dissatisfaction, but I held an independent position, and this coolness did not render me wretched.

I also managed to escape from the annoyances aroused by certain subalterns of the stage, and, being

determined that my voyage to Algiers should be a real pleasure-trip, I laughed at these puny attacks. Besides, my attention was directed to a matter far more interesting to me.

The journals had announced my performances, and this statement immediately aroused a paper warfare in the Algerian press, the strangeness of which contributed no little to give increased publicity to my representations.

"Robert-Houdin," one paper said, "cannot be at Algiers, for we see daily announced in the Paris papers, '*Robert-Houdin every evening at eight o'clock.*'"

"And why," another journal asked, pleasantly, "should not Robert-Houdin perform in Algiers and yet remain all the while in Paris? Do we not know that this sorcerer possesses the gift of ubiquity, and that he often gives performances at Paris, Rome, and Moscow on the same evening?"

The discussion went on thus for several days, some denying my presence, others affirming it.

The public of Algiers were willing to accept this fact as one of those pleasantries generally denominated *canards*, but they also wished to be sure of not being victims of a delusion if they came to the theatre.

At length the matter was taken up seriously, and the editors explained that Mr. Hamilton, on succeeding his brother-in-law, had kept up the old title; so that *Robert-Houdin* was a term equally applicable to the performer and to the style of performance.

This curious discussion, the annoyances occasioned by M. D——, and, as I hope I may believe, the attraction of my performance, brought me an enormous audience. All the tickets were bought beforehand, and the house was stiflingly hot, for the centigrade thermometer denoted 35 deg., and we were in the middle of September.

Poor spectators, how I pitied them! To judge from my own sensations, they must all have been mummified on the spot. I feared that the enthusiasm, as is the general rule, would be in an inverse ratio to the temperature; but I had no cause to complain of my reception, and I drew from this success a happy omen for the future.

In order not to deprive my "official representations," as M. de Neveu termed them, of the interest the reader will expect from them, I will give no details of those which preceded them, and were so many trial balloons. I may say the Arabs who came were very few; for

these men, with their indolent and sensual temper, consider the happiness of lying on a mat and smoking far above a spectacle.

Hence the governor, guided by the profound knowledge he had of their character, never invited them to a fête: he sent them a military summons. This occurred for my representations.

As M. de Neveu had announced to me, the expeditionary corps returned to Algiers on the 20th of October, and the fêtes, suspended by the campaign, were fixed for the 27th. Messengers were sent off to all parts of the colony, and on the appointed day the chiefs of the tribes, accompanied by a numerous suite, found themselves in the presence of the marshal-governor.

These autumnal fêtes, the most brilliant held in Algeria, and probably unrivalled in any country of the world, present a picturesque and really remarkable scene.

I should like to be able to paint here the strange aspect the capital assumed on the arrival of the *goums* of the Tell and the South. The native camp, an inextricable pell-mell of huts for men and horses, offering a thousand contrasts, strange as they were fascinating;

the brilliant cortége of the governor-general, in the midst of which the Arab chiefs, with their stern faces, attracted the eye by the luxury of their costumes, the beauty of their horses, and the brilliancy of their gold-broidered trappings; and the marvellous hippodrome, situated between the sea, the smiling hill of Mustapha, and the plain of Hussein-Dey, over which gloomy mountains cast a sombre shade. But I will say nothing about all this. Nor will I describe those military exercises called a Fantasia, in which twelve hundred Arabs, mounted on splendid steeds, and uttering wild cries as if on the battle-field, displayed the utmost vigour, skill, and intelligence men can possess. Nor will I speak of the admirable exhibition of Arab stallions, each exciting the most lively satisfaction as it passed; for all this has been already described, and I am longing to reach my own performances, which, I may say, formed not the least interesting part of this fête. I will only allude to one circumstance, which struck me peculiarly.

I saw a horseman, mounted on a magnificent Arab steed, beat all the winners in a final heat. This horseman was twelve years of age, and could pass under his horse without stooping.

The races lasted three days, and I was to give my performances at the end of the second and third.

Before beginning, I will say a word about the Algiers theatre.

It is a very neat house, in the style of the Variétés at Paris, and decorated with considerable taste. It is situated at the extremity of the Rue Bab-Azoun, on the *place* bearing that name, and the façade is peculiarly elegant.

On first seeing this immense edifice, it would be assumed that the interior was enormous: but it is nothing of the sort. The architect has sacrificed everything to the claims of public order and ventilation, while the stairs, passages, and green-room occupy as much space as the house itself. Perhaps the architect took into consideration the limited number of theatre-going people in Algiers, and thought that a small house would offer performers a better chance of success.

On the 28th of October, the day appointed for my first performance before the Arabs, I reached my post at an early hour, and could enjoy the sight of their entrance into the theatre.

Each *goum*, drawn up in companies, was introduced

separately, and led in perfect order to the places chosen for it in advance. Then came the turn of the chiefs, who seated themselves with all the gravity becoming their character.

Their introduction lasted some time, for these sons of nature could not understand that they were boxed up thus, side by side, to enjoy a spectacle, and our comfortable seats, far from seeming so to them, bothered them strangely. I saw them fidgeting about for some time, and trying to tuck their legs under them, after the fashion of European tailors.

Marshal Randon, with his family and suite, occupied the two stage-boxes to the right of the stage, while the prefect and other civilian authorities sat exactly facing him. As for Colonel de Neveu, he was everywhere, as the arranger of the festival.

The caïds, agas, bash-agas, and other titled Arabs, held the places of honour, for they occupied the orchestra-stalls and the dress-circle.

In the midst of them were several privileged officers, and, lastly, the interpreters were mingled among the spectators, to translate my remarks to them.

I was also told that several curious people, having been unable to procure tickets, had assumed the Arab

burnous, and, binding the camel's-hair cord round their foreheads, had slipped in among their new co-religionists.

This strange medley of spectators was indeed a most curious sight. The dress-circle, more especially, presented an appearance as grand as it was imposing. Some sixty Arab chiefs, clothed in their red mantles (the symbol of their submission to France), on which one or more decorations glistened, gravely awaited my performance with majestic dignity.

I have performed before many brilliant assemblies, but never before one which struck me so much as this. However, the impression I felt on the rise of the curtain, far from paralysing me, on the contrary inspired me with a lively sympathy for the spectators, whose faces seemed so well prepared to accept the marvels promised them. As soon as I walked on the stage, I felt quite at my ease, and enjoyed, in anticipation, the sight I was going to amuse myself with.

I felt, I confess, rather inclined to laugh at myself and my audience, for I stepped forth, wand in hand, with all the gravity of a real sorcerer. Still, I did not give way, for I was here not merely to amuse a curious and kind public, I must produce a startling

effect upon coarse minds and prejudices, for I was enacting the part of a French Marabout.

Compared with the simple tricks of their pretended sorcerers, my experiments must appear perfect miracles to the Arabs.

I commenced my performance in the most profound, I might almost say religious, silence, and the attention of the spectators was so great that they seemed petrified. Their fingers alone, moving nervously, played with the beads of their rosaries, while they were, doubtlessly, invoking the protection of the Most High.

This apathetic condition did not suit me, for I had not come to Algeria to visit a waxwork exhibition. I wanted movement, animation, life in fact, around me.

I changed my batteries, and, instead of generalising my remarks, I addressed them more especially to some of the Arabs, whom I stimulated by my words, and still more by my actions. The astonishment then gave way to a more expressive feeling, which was soon evinced by noisy outbursts.

This was especially the case when I produced cannon-balls from a hat, for my spectators, laying aside their gravity, expressed their delighted admiration by the strangest and most energetic gestures.

Then came—greeted by the same success—the bouquet of flowers, produced instantaneously from a hat; the *cornucopia*, supplying a multitude of objects, which I distributed, though unable to satisfy the repeated demands made on all sides, and still more by those who had their hands full already; the *five-franc pieces*, sent across the theatre into a crystal box suspended above the spectators.

One trick I should much have liked to perform was the *inexhaustible bottle*, so appreciated by the Parisians and the Manchester "hands;" but I could not employ it in this performance, for it is well known the followers of Muhammad drink no fermented liquor—at least not publicly. Hence, I substituted the following with considerable advantage.

I took a silver cup, like those called "punch-bowls" in the Parisian cafés. I unscrewed the foot, and passing my wand through it, showed that the vessel contained nothing; then, having refitted the two parts, I went to the centre of the pit, when, at my command, the bowl was *magically* filled with sweetmeats, which were found excellent.

The sweetmeats exhausted, I turned the bowl over, and proposed to fill it with excellent coffee; so, gravely

passing my hand thrice over the bowl, a dense vapour immediately issued from it, and announced the presence of the precious liquid. The bowl was full of boiling coffee, which I poured into cups, and offered to my astounded spectators.

The first cups were only accepted, so to speak, under protest; for not an Arab would consent to moisten his lips with a beverage which he thought came straight from Shaitan's kitchen; but, insensibly seduced by the perfume of their favourite liquor, and urged by the interpreters, some of the boldest decided on tasting the magic liquor, and all soon followed their example.

The vessel, rapidly emptied, was repeatedly filled again with equal rapidity; and it satisfied all demands, like my inexhaustible bottle, and was borne back to the stage still full.

But it was not enough to amuse my spectators; I must also, in order to fulfil the object of my mission, startle and even terrify them by the display of a supernatural power.

My arrangements had all been made for this purpose, and I had reserved for the end of my performances three tricks, which must complete my reputation as a sorcerer.

Many of my readers will remember having seen at my performances a small but solidly-built box, which, being handed to the spectators, becomes heavy or light at my order; a child might raise it with ease, and yet the most powerful man could not move it from its place.

I advanced, with my box in my hand, to the centre of the "practicable," communicating from the stage to the pit; then, addressing the Arabs, I said to them:

"From what you have witnessed, you will attribute a supernatural power to me, and you are right. I will give you a new proof of my marvellous authority, by showing that I can deprive the most powerful man of his strength and restore it at my will. Any one who thinks himself strong enough to try the experiment may draw near me." (I spoke slowly, in order to give the interpreter time to translate my words.)

An Arab of middle height, but well built and muscular, like many of the Arabs are, came to my side with sufficient assurance.

"Are you very strong?" I said to him, measuring him from head to foot."

"Oh yes!" he replied, carelessly.

"Are you sure you will always remain so?"

"Quite sure."

"You are mistaken, for in an instant I will rob you of your strength, and you shall become as a little child."

The Arab smiled disdainfully, as a sign of his incredulity.

"Stay," I continued; "lift up this box."

The Arab stooped, lifted up the box, and said to me, coldly, "Is that all?"

"Wait——!" I replied.

Then, with all possible gravity, I made an imposing gesture, and solemnly pronounced the words:

"Behold! you are weaker than a woman; now, try to lift the box."

The Hercules, quite cool as to my conjuration, seized the box once again by the handle, and gave it a violent tug, but this time the box resisted, and, spite of his most vigorous attacks, would not budge an inch.

The Arab vainly expended on this unlucky box a strength which would have raised an enormous weight, until, at length, exhausted, panting, and red with anger, he stopped, became thoughtful, and began to comprehend the influences of magic.

He was on the point of withdrawing; but that would be allowing his weakness, and that he, hitherto re-

spected for his vigour, had become as a little child. This thought rendered him almost mad.

Deriving fresh strength from the encouragements his friends offered him by word and deed, he turned a glance round them, which seemed to say: "You will see what a son of the desert can do."

He bent once again over the box: his nervous hands twined round the handle, and his legs, placed on either side like two bronze columns, served as a support for the final effort.

But, wonder of wonders! this Hercules, a moment since so strong and proud, now bows his head; his arms, riveted to the box, undergo a violent muscular contraction; his legs give way, and he falls on his knees with a yell of agony!

An electric shock, produced by an inductive apparatus, had been passed, on a signal from me, from the further end of the stage into the handle of the box. Hence the contortions of the poor Arab!

It would have been cruelty to prolong this scene.

I gave a second signal, and the electric current was immediately intercepted. My athlete, disengaged from his terrible bondage, raised his hands over his head.

"Allah! Allah!" he exclaimed, full of terror; then,

wrapping himself up quickly in the folds of his burnous, as if to hide his disgrace, he rushed through the ranks of the spectators and gained the front entrance.

With the exception of my stage-boxes and the privileged spectators, who appeared to take great pleasure in this experiment, my audience had become grave and silent, and I heard the words "Shaitan!" "Djenoum!" passing in a murmur round the circle of credulous men, who, while gazing on me, seemed astonished that I possessed none of the physical qualities attributed to the angel of darkness.

I allowed my public a few moments to recover from the emotion produced by my experiment and the flight of the herculean Arab.

One of the means employed by the Marabouts to gain influence in the eyes of the Arabs is by causing a belief in their invulnerability.

One of them, for instance, ordered a gun to be loaded and fired at him from a short distance, but in vain did the flint produce a shower of sparks; the Marabout pronounced some cabalistic words, and the gun did not explode.

The mystery was simple enough; the gun did not go off because the Marabout had skilfully stopped up the vent.

Colonel de Neveu explained to me the importance of discrediting such a miracle by opposing to it a sleight-of-hand trick far superior to it, and I had the very article.

I informed the Arabs that I possessed a talisman rendering me invulnerable, and I defied the best marksman in Algeria to hit me.

I had hardly uttered the words, when an Arab, who had attracted my notice by the attention he had paid to my tricks, jumped over four rows of seats, and disdaining the use of the "practicable," crossed the orchestra, upsetting flutes, clarionets, and violins, escaladed the stage, while burning himself at the footlights, and then said, in excellent French,

"I will kill you!"

An immense burst of laughter greeted both the Arab's picturesque ascent and his murderous intentions, while an interpreter who stood near me told me I had to deal with a Marabout.

"You wish to kill me!" I replied, imitating his accent and the inflection of his voice. "Well, I re-

ply, that though you are a sorcerer, I am a still greater one, and you will not kill me."

I held a cavalry pistol in my hand, which I presented to him.

"Here, take this weapon, and assure yourself it has undergone no preparation."

The Arab breathed several times down the barrel, then through the nipple, to assure himself there was a communication between them, and after carefully examining the pistol, said:

"The weapon is good, and I will kill you."

"As you are determined, and for more certainty, put in a double charge of powder, and a wad on the top."

"It is done."

"Now, here is a leaden ball; mark it with your knife, so as to be able to recognise it, and put it in the pistol, with a second wad."

"It is done."

"Now that you are quite sure your pistol is loaded, and that it will explode, tell me, do you feel no remorse, no scruple about killing me thus, although I authorise you to do so?"

"No, for I wish to kill you," the Arab repeated, coldly.

Without replying, I put an apple on the point of a knife, and, standing a few yards from the Marabout, ordered him to fire.

"Aim straight at the heart," I said to him.

My opponent aimed immediately, without the slightest hesitation.

The pistol exploded, and the bullet lodged in the centre of the apple.

I carried the talisman to the Marabout, who recognised the ball he had marked.

I could not say that this trick produced greater stupefaction than the one preceding it: at any rate, my spectators, palsied by surprise and terror, looked round in silence, seeming to think, "Where the deuce have we got to here!"

A pleasant scene, however, soon unwrinkled many of their faces. The Marabout, though stupified by his defeat, had not lost his wits; so, profiting by the moment when he returned me the pistol, he seized the apple, thrust it into his waist-belt, and could not be induced to return it, persuaded as he was that he possessed in it an incomparable talisman.

For the last trick in my performance, I required the assistance of an Arab.

At the request of several interpreters, a young Moor, about twenty years of age, tall, well built, and richly dressed, consented to come on the stage. Bolder and more civilised, doubtlessly, than his comrades of the plains, he walked firmly up to me.

I drew him towards the table that was in the centre of the stage, and pointed out to him and to the other spectators that it was slightly built and perfectly isolated. After which, without further preface, I told him to mount upon it, and covered him with an enormous cloth cone, open at the top.

Then, drawing the cone and its contents on to a plank, the ends of which were held by my servant and myself, we walked to the foot-lights with our heavy burden, and upset it. The Moor had disappeared—the cone was perfectly empty!

Immediately there began a spectacle which I shall never forget.

The Arabs were so affected by this last trick, that, impelled by an irresistible feeling of terror, they rose in all parts of the house, and yielded to the influence of a general panic. To tell the truth, the crowd of fugitives was densest at the door of the dress-circle, and it could be seen, from the agility and confusion of

these high dignitaries, that they were the first to wish to leave the house.

Vainly did one of them, the Caïd of the Beni-Salah, more courageous than his colleagues, try to restrain them by his words:

"Stay! stay! we cannot thus lose one of our co-religionists. Surely we must know what has become of him, or what has been done to him. Stay! stay!"

But the co-religionists only ran away the faster, and soon the courageous caïd, led away by their example, followed them.

They little knew what awaited them at the door of the theatre; but they had scarce gone down the steps when they found themselves face to face with the "resuscitated Moor."

The first movement of terror overcome, they surrounded the man, felt and cross-questioned him; but, annoyed by these repeated questions, he had no better resource than to escape at full speed.

The next evening the second performance took place, and produced nearly the same effect as the previous one.

The blow was struck: henceforth the interpreters

and all those who had dealings with the Arabs received orders to make them understand that my pretended miracles were only the result of skill, inspired and guided by an art called *prestidigitation*, in no way connected with sorcery.

The Arabs doubtlessly yielded to these arguments, for henceforth I was on the most friendly terms with them. Each time a chief saw me, he never failed to come up and press my hand. And, even more, these men whom I had so terrified, when they became my friends, gave me a precious testimony of their esteem—I may say, too, of their admiration, for that is their own expression.

Three days had elapsed since my last performance, when I received a despatch from the governor, ordering me to be at the palace by twelve o'clock, *military time.*

Of course I kept the appointment, and the last stroke of twelve was still striking by the clock of the neighbouring mosque when I sent in my name at the palace A staff officer immediately came to me.

"Come with me, M. Robert-Houdin," he said, with a half mysterious air. "I am ordered to conduct you."

I followed my conductor, and, as the door of a mag-

nificent room was open at the end of a gallery we crossed, I saw a strange sight. Some thirty of the most important Arab chiefs were arranged in a circle, of which I naturally formed the centre when I entered the room.

"Salâm aleikoum!" they said, in a grave and almost solemn voice, as they laid their hands on their hearts.

I first returned this salutation by bowing in the French fashion, and then by several hand-shakings, beginning with those chiefs whose acquaintance I had already formed.

At the head was the Bash-Aga Bou-Allem, the African Rothschild, in whose tent I had drunk my coffee at the Arab camp during the races.

Next came the Caïd Assa, with a wooden leg, who had also offered me pipes and coffee in the same encampment. As this chief did not understand a word of French, my friend Boukandoura was enabled, during a visit we paid him, to tell me the history of the wooden leg in his presence.

"Assa," my friend said, "having had his leg shattered in an affair against the French, owed his escape to the speed of his horse. Once in a place of safety, he himself cut off his leg above the knee, and

then, in his wild energy, thrust the mutilated stump into a vessel full of boiling pitch, in order to stop the hemorrhage."

Wishing to return the salutations I had received, I went round the group, offering my hand to each in turn. But my task was remarkably abridged, for the ranks thinned at my approach, as many of the company had not the courage to take the hand of a man they had seriously regarded as a sorcerer or the demon in person.

This incident, however, did not disturb the ceremony in any way. After a laugh at the pusillanimity of the fugitives, each reassumed that gravity which is the normal condition of the Arab countenance.

Then the most aged chief in the assembly advanced towards me, and unrolled an enormous MS. It was an address, written in verse, a perfect masterpiece of native caligraphy, and adorned with graceful arabesques drawn by hand.

The worthy Arab, who was at least seventy years of age, then read, in a loud voice, the piece of Mussulman poetry, which was perfectly unintelligible to me, as I knew only three words of Arabic.

When the reading was ended, the orator drew from

his belt the signet of his tribe, and solemnly placed it at the bottom of the page. The principal Arab chiefs and dignitaries followed his example, and when all the seals had been affixed, my old friend took the paper, and after assuring himself the imprints were quite dry, he rolled it up and presented it to me, saying, in excellent French, and in a tone that revealed his sincerity:

"To a merchant, gold is given; to a warrior, arms are offered; to thee, Robert-Houdin, we present a testimony of our admiration, which thou canst hand down to thy children." And, translating a verse he had just read in Arabic, he added, "Pardon us for presenting thee with such a trifle, but is it fitting to offer mother-o'-pearl to the man who possesses the real jewel?"

I avow very frankly that never in my life did I experience such sweet emotion—never had my success penetrated so fully to my heart; and, moved more than I can express, I turned to wipe away a tear of sympathy.

These details, as well as the following, certainly wound my modesty a little, but I cannot make up my mind to pass them over in silence; hence, I must

beg the reader to accept them as a mere picture of manners.

I declare, too, that the thought never entered my mind of having deserved such praise, and yet I cannot refrain from feeling as much flattered as grateful for this homage, and regarding it as the most precious souvenir of my professional career.

This declaration made, I will furnish a translation of the address, in the words used by the caligrapher himself:

"Homage offered to Robert-Houdin, by the chiefs of the Arab tribes, after his performances given at Algiers on the 28th and 29th of October, 1856.

"GLORY TO GOD,

who teaches us what we know not, and enables us to express the treasures of the mind by the flowers of eloquence and the signs of writing.

"Generous-handed destiny has sent down from above, in the midst of lightning and thunder, like a powerful and fertilising rain, the marvel of the moment and the age, him who cultivates the surprising arts and marvellous sciences—the *Sid*-Robert-Houdin.

"Our century has seen no one comparable with him. The splendour of his talent surpasses the most brilliant productions of past ages. Our age is the more illustrious because it has possessed him.

"He has known how to stir our hearts and astonish our minds, by displaying to us the surprising facts of his marvellous science. Our eyes were never before fascinated by such prodigies. What he accomplishes cannot be described. We owe him our gratitude for all the things by which he has delighted our eyes and our minds; hence, our friendship for him has sunk into our hearts like a perfumed shower, and our bosoms preciously conceal it.

"We shall in vain attempt to raise our praises to the height of his merit; we must lower our brows before him and pay him homage, so long as the benevolent shower fertilises the soil, so long as the moon illuminates the night, so long as clouds come to temper the heat of the sun.

"Written by the slave of God,

"ALI-BEN-EL-HADJI MOUSSA.

"Pardon us for presenting thee with," &c. &c.

Then follow the seals and signatures of the chiefs of the tribes.

After the ceremony was over, and the Arabs had left us, the marshal-governor, whom I had not seen since my performances, being desirous to give me an idea of the effect they had produced on the minds of the natives, quoted the following incident:

A Kabyle chief, who had come to Algiers to make his submission, was taken to my first performance.

The next day, at an early hour, he went to the palace, and asked to speak with the governor.

"I have," he said to the marshal, "to ask your permission to return immediately to my tribe."

"You must be aware," the marshal replied, "that the forms are not yet filled up, and the papers will not be in order for three days; you will, therefore, remain for that period."

"Allah is great," the Arab said, "and if it pleaseth Him I shall go away before; you will not be able to stop me."

"You will not go, I feel certain, if I forbid it. But tell me, why are you in such a hurry to leave?"

"After what I saw yesterday I don't wish to stay in Algiers; a misfortune would happen to me."

"Did you regard the miracles as real?"

The Kabyle surveyed the marshal with an air of

astonishment, and, without replying directly to the question addressed him, said:

"Instead of killing your soldiers in conquering the Kabyles, send your French Marabout to the most rebel tribes, and before a fortnight he will bring them all to you."

The Kabyle did *not* leave, for the interpreters managed to remove his fears; still he was one of those who kept furthest aloof from me during the ceremony I have described.

Another Arab also said, on leaving one of my performances:

"Our Marabouts must now do very great miracles to astonish us."

These statements from the governor's own lips were very agreeable to me, for up to that moment I had felt rather uneasy; and although I was certain I had produced a startling impression by my performances, I was enchanted at learning that the object of my mission had been carried out according to the wishes of government. In addition, before I started for France, the marshal was kind enough to assure me once again that my performances in Algeria had produced the happiest effect in the minds of the natives.

Although my performances were ended, I was in no hurry to return to France. I was curious, in my turn, to witness a conjuring performance of the Marabouts, or other native jugglers. I had also promised several Arab chiefs to visit them in their *douars*, and I wished to enjoy this double pleasure.

There are few Frenchmen who, after a short stay in Algeria, have not heard of the Aïssaoua and their marvels. The stories I had been told of the experiments performed by the followers of Sid-Aïssa had inspired me with the liveliest desire to see them, and I was persuaded that all their miracles were only more or less ingenious tricks, which I should be able to detect.

As M. le Colonel Neveu had promised me the opportunity of seeing them, he kept his word.

On a day chosen by the Mokaddem, the usual president of this sort of meeting, we went, accompanied by several staff officers and their wives, to an Arab house, and proceeded through a low archway into the inner court, where the ceremony was to take place. Lights artistically fixed on the walls, and carpets spread on the pavement, awaited the arrival of the brothers, while a cushion was reserved for the Mokaddem.

We all took our seats where we should not disturb

the performance, and our ladies went up to a gallery on the first floor, and thus represented our dress-boxes.

But I will let Colonel Neveu himself describe this scene, by copying *verbatim* from his interesting work "The Religious Orders among the Mussulmans of Algeria:"

"The Aïssaoua entered, formed a circle in the court-yard, and soon began their chants. These were at first slow and solemn chants, that lasted a long time; then came the praises of Sidi-Muhammad-Ben-Aïssa, founder of the order; after which the Brethren and the Mokaddem, taking up cymbals and tambourines, gradually increased the speed of the chanting.

"After about two hours the songs had become wild cries, and the gestures of the Brethren had followed the same impulse. Suddenly some of them rose and formed a line, dancing, and pronouncing as gutturally as they could, and with all the vigour of their energetic lungs, the sacred name of Allah. This word, issuing from the mouths of the Aïssaoua, seemed rather a savage growl than an invocation addressed to the Supreme Being. Soon the noise increased, the most extravagant gestures began, while turbans fell off and exposed their shorn heads, which look like those of

vultures; the long folds of their red sashes became unfastened, embarrassing their movements and increasing the disorder.

"Then the Aïssaoua moved about on their hands and knees, imitating the movements of wild animals. They seemed to be acting under the influence of some muscular force, and they forgot they were men.

"When the excitement had reached its height, and the perspiration was running down their bodies, the Aïssaoua began their juggling. They called the Mokaddem their father, and asked him for food; he gave to some pieces of glasses, which they champed between their teeth; he placed nails in the mouths of others, but, instead of swallowing them, they carefully hid their heads in the folds of the Mokaddem's burnous, in order not to let the audience see them remove them. Some devoured thorns and thistles; others passed their tongues over a red-hot iron and took them in their hands without burning themselves. One man struck his left arm with his right hand: the flesh appeared to open, and the blood poured forth abundantly; then he passed his hand over his arm, the wound closed, and the blood disappeared. Another leaped on to the edge of a sabre held by two

men, and did not cut his feet; while others produced from small leathern sacks scorpions and serpents, which they boldly placed in their mouths."

I had concealed myself behind a pillar, whence I could survey everything without being noticed. I insisted on not being the dupe of these mysterious tricks: hence I paid the closest attention.

Both through the remarks I made on the scene of action, and the ulterior researches I undertook, I am now in a position to give a satisfactory explanation of the miracles of the Aïssaoua. But, not to interrupt my narrative, I will refer the reader who is anxious for these details to the end of this volume, and the special chapter I have christened A COURSE OF MIRACLES.

I believe myself the more competent to supply these explanations, as some of the tricks belong to conjuring proper, and others are based on phenomena drawn from the physical sciences.

CHAPTER VIII.

Excursion in the Interior of Africa—The Abode of a Bash-Aga—A comical Repast—A Soirée of Arab Dignitaries—A Marabout mystified—Tent-life in Algeria—I return to France—A terrible Storm—Conclusion.

ONCE possessed of the secret of the juggling performed by the Aïssaoua, I was able to start for the interior of Africa. I therefore set out, provided with letters from Colonel de Neveu, to several heads of the Arab department, his subordinates, and I took with me Mme. Robert-Houdin, who was quite delighted at the thought of making this excursion.

We were going to visit the Arab beneath his tent or in his house; eat his "couscoussou," which we only knew by name; study for ourselves the domestic manners and customs of Africa: this was certainly enough to inflame our imagination. So much was this the case, that I hardly ever thought that the

month in which we should re-embark for France would be the one in which the Mediterranean is so stormy.

Among the Arabs who had invited me to visit them, Bou-Allem-Ben-Sherifa, Bash-Aga of the D'jendel, had pressed me so strongly that I determined on commencing my round of visits with him.

Our journey from Algiers to Médéah was most prosaic, for a diligence conveyed us there in two days.

Apart from the interest inspired in us by the peculiar vegetation of Algeria, as well as the famous peak of the Mouzaïa, which we passed at a gallop, the incidents of the journey were the same as on any French high road. The hotels were kept by Frenchmen, and you dined at the table d'hôte on the same fare, at the same price, and with the same attendance. This bagman's existence was not what we had anticipated on leaving Algiers. Hence, we were delighted to get out at Médéah, as the diligence did not follow the same road as ourselves beyond this point.

Captain Ritter, head of the Arab office at Médéah, to whom I went, had seen my performances at Algiers: hence, I had no occasion to hand him the letter of recommendation addressed to him by M. de Neveu.

He received me with great affability, and Mme. Ritter joined her entreaties to her husband's that we should visit the town. I indeed regretted being obliged to leave such agreeable persons the next morning; but I was obliged to hurry my tour over before the autumnal rains set in, which render the roads impracticable, and often, indeed, very dangerous.

The captain acceded to my wishes; he lent us two horses from his stable, and gave us as a guide to Bou-Allem's a caïd who spoke French excellently.

This Arab had been caught when quite a youth in a hut which Abd-ul-Khadr had been forced to abandon after one of his numerous defeats. The government sent the lad to the Louis-le-Grand College, where he got on excellently in his studies. But, constantly pursued by the remembrance of his African sky, and the national "couscoussou" our bachelor of arts asked the favour of being sent back to Algeria. Owing to his education he was made caïd of a small tribe, whose name I have forgotten, but which lay on the route we were going to take.

My guide—whom I will call Muhammad, because I have forgotten his name also (for Arab names are difficult to remember by those who have not lived

some time in Algeria)—Muhammad, then, was accompanied by four Arabs of his tribe: two of them were to carry our baggage, and the other two wait upon us. All were mounted, and proceeded before us.

We started at eight in the morning, as our first stage was not to be long, for Muhammad assured me that, if it pleased God (a formula a true believer never omits in speaking of the future), we should arrive at his house in time for breakfast. In fact, about three hours after we had set out, our little caravan reached Muhammad's modest *douar*, and we dismounted in front of a villa, entirely composed of branches, of which the roof was hardly of man's height. This was the caïd's reception-room.

The door was opened, and our guide showed us the way by walking in first. Only one piece of furniture ornamented the interior; it was a small wooden stool, which my wife converted into a seat. Muhammad and I seated ourselves on a carpet, which an Arab had spread at our feet, and breakfast was soon served up. Muhammad, who, I fancy, wished to gain our pardon for a grave crime he was about to commit, treated us sumptuously, and almost in the French style. A rich soup, roast fowls, various ragoûts, which I cannot

describe, as my culinary studies have been very limited, and pastry, which Félix himself would not have disowned, were placed before us in turn. More than that, my wife and I had been handed an iron knife, fork, and spoon—an unheard of thing at an Arab's.

The meal had been brought from an adjacent *gourbi*, where the caïd's mother resided. This lady had lived in Algiers for a long time, where she had acquired the skill of which she had just offered us a specimen.

As for Muhammad, he had resumed the fashions of his ancestors, with the Mussulman costume, and lived on dates and "couscoussou," save when he had any guests, which was extremely rare.

Our breakfast over, the host advised to set out again, if we wished to reach Bou-Allem's before nightfall; and we followed his advice.

From Médéah to Muhammad's *douar* we had followed a tolerable road, but on leaving his house we entered on a barren and desert country, where we saw no other signs of a road than those left by ourselves. The sun poured its most torrid beams upon our heads, and we found no shade along our route to protect us from it. Frequently, too, our progress became very laborious, for we came to ravines, into which we had to descend at the risk of our horses' knees and our

own necks. To restore our patience, our guide told us we should soon reach more even ground, and we continued our journey.

About two hours after leaving our first halt, Muhammad quitted us at full gallop, saying he would soon return, and disappeared behind a mound.

We never saw our caïd again.

I learned, afterwards, that in his jealousy of Bou-Allem's wealth, he preferred incurring a punishment sooner than pay a visit to his rival.

This flight rendered my wife and myself very uncomfortable, and we exchanged our ideas on the subject, with no fear of being understood by our guides. We were alarmed by the bad example given by Muhammad. Suppose the four Arabs were to imitate their chief, and also abandon us! What would become of us in a country where, even if we were to meet anybody, we could not make him understand our wishes?

But we escaped with the fear. Our worthy guides remained faithful to us, and were even very polite and attentive during the journey. Besides, as Muhammad had told us, we soon reached a road leading us straight to the abode of Bou-Allem.

Compared with the caïd's house, the bash-aga's

might be considered a princely residence, less, however, through the architectural beauty of the buildings than through their extent. As in all Arab houses, only walls could be seen from without; all the windows looked on court-yards or gardens.

Bou-Allem and his son, warned of our arrival, came to meet us, and paid us in Arabic compliments I did not understand, but which I supposed to be the usual salâmalecks, that is to say:

"Be ye welcome, oh ye invited of Deity!"

Such, however, was my confidence, that, whatever might have been said to me, I should have accepted it as a compliment.

We dismounted, and sat down upon a stone bench, where coffee was soon served up to us. In Algeria people drink coffee and smoke the whole day long. It is true that this beverage is not made so strong as in France, and the cups are very small.

Bou-Allem, after lighting a pipe, handed it to me: it was an honour he did me to let me smoke after him, and I could not decline it, though I might have preferred it to be just the "other way about."

As I have already stated, I only knew three or four words of Arabic, and with such a poor vocabulary it

was difficult to talk with my hosts. Still, they evidenced great joy at my arrival, for every moment they renewed their protestations, while laying their hands on their hearts. I replied by similar signs, and hence had not to draw on my imagination to keep up the conversation.

Later, however, urged by an appetite whose prompt satisfaction I did not calculate on, I ventured on a new pantomime. Laying my hand on the pit of my stomach, and assuming a suffering air, I tried to make Bou-Allem comprehend that we required more substantial food than civil compliments. The intelligent Arab understood me, and gave orders for the meal to be hastened on.

In the mean while, and to keep us quiet, he offered, by gestures, to show us his apartments.

We ascended a small stone staircase, and, on arriving at the first floor, our guide opened a door, which offered this peculiarity, that, to pass through it, you were obliged to lower your head and lift your foot simultaneously. In other words, this door was so low, that a man of ordinary height could not pass through it without stooping, and, as the floor was raised, you were obliged to step up on it.

This chamber was the bash-aga's reception-room; the walls were covered with red arabesques relieved with gold, and the ground strown with magnificent Turkey carpets. Four divans, covered with rich silk stuffs, completed the entire furniture, with a small mahogany table, on which were spread pipes, porcelain coffee-cups, and other objects especially used by Mussulmans. Among them, Bou-Allem took up a flask filled with rose-water, and poured it on our hands. The perfume was delicate: unfortunately, our host wished to do things grandly, and in order to show the esteem he held us in, employed the rest of the bottle in literally sprinkling us from head to foot.

We visited two other large rooms, more simply decorated than the first, and in one of them was an enormous divan. Bou-Allem made us comprehend that was where he slept.

These details would have been very interesting at any other moment, but we were dying of hunger, and, according to the proverb, "a starving belly has neither eyes nor ears." I was just going to recommence my famous pantomime, when, in passing through a small room, in which the only furniture was a carpet, our cicerone opened his mouth, pointed with his finger

that something was going to be placed in it, and thus made us understand we were in the dining-room. I laid my hand on my heart to express all the pleasure I experienced.

By Bou-Allem's invitation we sat down on the carpet, round a large waiter put down in place of a table.

Once seated, two Arabs came in to wait on us.

In France, servants wait with their heads uncovered; in Algeria, they keep on their head-covering; but, in return, as a mark of respect, they leave their shoes at the door, and serve barefooted. Between our servants and those of the Arabs the only difference is from head to foot.

We were the only guests seated with Bou-Allem, for the son had not the honour of dining with his father, who always ate alone.

A species of salad-bowl, filled with something like pumpkin soup, was brought in, and I am very fond of that dish.

"What a fortunate thing," I said to my wife, "Bou-Allem has guessed my taste; how I will do honour to his cook."

My host, doubtlessly, understood the meaning of

my remark, for, after offering us each a clumsy wooden spoon, he begged us to follow his example, and plunged his weapon in up to the wrist. We imitated him.

I soon took out an enormous spoonful, which I hastily lifted to my mouth; but I had scarce tasted it ere I exclaimed, with a horrible grimace:

"Pouah! what can that be? My mouth is on fire."

My wife withdrew the spoonful she had raised to her lips, but either her appetite or her curiosity induced her to taste it. She did so, but soon joined me in coughing. It was a regular pepper-pot.

While apparently vexed at this contretemps, our host swallowed enormous spoonfuls of the soup, and each time he stretched out his arm with an air of beatitude, intended to convey to us "And yet how good it is."

The soup-tureen was taken away almost empty.

"Bueno! bueno!" Bou-Allem exclaimed, pointing to a dish just placed before us.

Bueno is Spanish, and the worthy bash-aga, knowing two or three words of that language, was not vexed to display his learning to us.

This famous dish was a species of ragoût, bearing some affinity to haricot mutton. When I lived at Belleville, this was the masterpiece of Mme. Auguste, and I always gave it a very good reception. Hence, in remembrance of my good old cook, I was about to fall on the ragoût; but I looked around in vain for a fork, a knife, or even the wooden spoon handed us for the soup.

Bou-Allem released me from the dilemma; he showed me, by himself plunging his fingers into the dish, that a fork was a very useless instrument.

As hunger tormented us, we overcame our repugnance, and my wife, to encourage me, delicately fished up a small piece of mutton. The sauce was very highly spiced, but still, by eating very little meat and a great deal of bread, we were enabled to render the poison innocuous.

That I might be agreeable to my host, I unfortunately repeated the Spanish words he had taught me. This compliment, which he believed sincere, caused him extreme pleasure, and he drew out from the dish a bone with meat hanging to it, and after tearing off some pieces with his nails, offered them politely to my wife.

I wondered how Madame Houdin would get rid of

this singular present; but she did so much more cleverly than I expected. Bou-Allem having turned his head to give an order, the piece of meat was restored to the dish with astounding craft, and we were much inclined to laugh when our host, unsuspectingly, took this very piece of mutton for his own gratification.

We welcomed with great satisfaction a roast fowl served after the ragoût; I took on myself to carve it, or, in other words, to tear it asunder with my fingers, and I did so most delicately. We found it so much to our taste that not a particle was left.

Then came other dishes, which we tasted with due care, among them being the famous "couscoussou," which I found detestable, and the meal terminated with sweetmeats.

Our hands were in a deplorable condition, and an Arab brought us each a basin and soap to wash them.

Bou-Allem, after performing the operation, and washing his beard with the greatest care, took a handful of soapsuds and rinsed his mouth. This was the only liquor served at table.

After dinner we proceeded to another room, and, on the road, were joined by a young Arab whom Bou-Allem had sent for. This man had been for a long

time servant at Algiers, and spoke French excellently; hence he would serve as our interpreter.

We entered a small room very elegantly decorated, in which were two divans.

"This," our host said, "is the room reserved for guests of distinction; you can go to bed when you like, but if you are not tired, I would ask your leave to present to you several chief men of my tribe, who, having heard of you, wish to see you."

"Let them come in," I said, after consulting Madame Houdin, "we will receive them with pleasure."

The interpreter went out, and soon brought in a dozen old men, among whom were a Marabout and several talebs, whom the bash-aga appeared to hold in great deference.

They sat down in a circle on carpets and kept up a very lively conversation about my performances at Algiers. This learned society discussed the probability of the marvels related by the chief of the tribe, who took great pleasure in depicting his impressions and those of his co-religionists at the sight of the *miracles* I had performed.

Each lent an attentive ear to these stories, and regarded me with a species of veneration; the Marabout

alone displayed a degree of scepticism, and asserted that the spectators had been duped by what he called a vision.

Jealous of my reputation as a French sorcerer, I thought I must perform before the unbeliever a few tricks as a specimen of my late performance. I had the pleasure of astounding my audience, but the Marabout continued to offer me a systematic opposition, by which his neighbours were visibly annoyed; the poor fellow did not suspect, though, what I had in store for him.

My antagonist wore in his sash a watch, the chain of which hung outside.

I believe I have already mentioned a certain talent I possess of filching a watch, a pin, a pocket-book, &c., with a skill by which several of my friends have been victimised.

I was fortunately born with an honest and upright heart, or this peculiar talent might have led me too far. When I felt inclined for a joke of this nature, I turned it to profit in a conjuring trick, or waited till my friend took leave of me, and then recalled him: "Stay," I would say, handing him the stolen article, "let this serve as a lesson to put you on your guard against persons less honest than myself."

But to return to our Marabout. I had stolen his

watch as I passed near him and slipped into its place a five-franc piece.

To prevent his detecting it, and while waiting till I could profit by my larceny, I improvised a trick. After juggling away Bou-Allem's rosary, I made it pass into one of the numerous slippers left at the door by the guests; this shoe was next found to be full of coins, and to end this little scene comically, I made five-franc pieces come out of the noses of the spectators. They took such pleasure in this trick that I fancied I should never terminate it. "*Douros! douros!*" they shouted, as they twitched their noses. I willingly acceded to their request, and the *douros* issued at command.

The delight was so great that several Arabs rolled on the ground; this coarsely expressed joy on the part of Muhammadans was worth frenzied applause to me.

I pretended to keep aloof from the Marabout, who, as I expected, remained serious and impassive.

When calm was restored, my rival began speaking hurriedly to his neighbours, as if striving to dispel their illusion, and, not succeeding, he addressed me through the interpreter:

"You will not deceive me in that way," he said, with a crafty look.

"Why so?"

"Because I don't believe in your power."

"Ah, indeed! Well, then, if you do not believe in my power, I will compel you to believe in my skill."

"Neither in one nor the other."

I was at this moment the whole length of the room from the Marabout.

"Stay," I said to him; "you see this five-franc piece?"

"Yes."

"Close your hand firmly, for the piece will go into it in spite of yourself."

"I am ready," the Arab said, in an incredulous voice, as he held out his tightly closed fist.

I took the piece at the end of my fingers, so that the assembly might all see it, then, feigning to throw it at the Marabout, it disappeared at the word "Pass!"

My man opened his hand, and, finding nothing in it, shrugged his shoulders, as if to say, "You see, I told you so."

I was well aware the piece was not there, but it was important to draw the Marabout's attention momentarily from his sash, and for this purpose I employed the feint.

"That does not surprise me," I replied, "for I threw the piece with such strength that it went right through your hand, and has fallen into your sash. Being afraid I might break your watch by the blow, I called it to me: here it is!" And I showed him the watch in my hand.

The Marabout quickly put his hand in his waist-belt, to assure himself of the truth, and was quite stupified at finding the five-franc piece.

The spectators were astounded. Some among them began telling their beads with a vivacity evidencing a certain agitation of mind; but the Marabout frowned without saying a word, and I saw he was spelling over some evil design.

"I now believe in your supernatural power," he said; "you are a real sorcerer; hence, I hope you will not fear to repeat here a trick you performed in your theatre;" and offering me two pistols he held concealed beneath his burnous, he added, "Come, choose one of these pistols; we will load it, and I will fire at you. You have nothing to fear, as you can ward off all blows."

I confess I was for a moment staggered; I sought a subterfuge and found none. All eyes were fixed upon me, and a reply was anxiously awaited.

The Marabout was triumphant.

Bou-Allem, being aware that my tricks were only the result of skill, was angry that his guest should be so pestered; hence he began reproaching the Marabout. I stopped him, however, for an idea had occurred to me which would save me from my dilemma, at least temporarily; then, addressing my adversary:

"You are aware," I said, with assurance, "that I require a talisman in order to be invulnerable, and, unfortunately, I have left mine at Algiers."

The Marabout began laughing with an incredulous air.

"Still," I continued, "I can, by remaining six hours at prayers, do without the talisman, and defy your weapon. To-morrow morning, at eight o'clock, I will allow you to fire at me in the presence of these Arabs, who were witnesses of your challenge."

Bou-Allem, astonished at such a promise, asked me once again if this offer were serious, and if he should invite the company for the appointed hour. On my affirmative, they agreed to meet before the stone bench I have already alluded to.

I did not spend my night at prayers, as may be sup-

posed, but I employed about two hours in ensuring my invulnerability; then, satisfied with the result, I slept soundly, for I was terribly tired.

By eight the next morning we had breakfasted, our horses were saddled, and our escort was awaiting the signal for our departure, which would take place after the famous experiment.

None of the guests were absent, and, indeed, a great number of Arabs came in to swell the crowd.

The pistols were handed me; I called attention to the fact that the vents were clear, and the Marabout put in a fair charge of powder and drove the wad home. Among the bullets produced, I chose one which I openly put in the pistol, and which was then also covered with paper.

The Arab watched all these movements, for his honour was at stake.

We went through the same process with the second pistol, and the solemn moment arrived.

Solemn, indeed, it seemed to everybody—to the spectators who were uncertain of the issue, to Madame Houdin, who had in vain besought me to give up this trick, for she feared the result—and solemn also to me, for as my new trick did not depend on any of the

arrangements made at Algiers, I feared an error, an act of treachery—I knew not what.

Still I posted myself at fifteen paces from the sheik, without evincing the slightest emotion.

The Marabout immediately seized one of the pistols, and, on my giving the signal, took a deliberate aim at me.

The pistol went off, and the ball appeared between my teeth.

More angry than ever, my rival tried to seize the other pistol, but I succeeded in reaching it before him.

"You could not injure me," I said to him, "but you shall now see that my aim is more dangerous than yours. Look at that wall."

I pulled the trigger, and on the newly whitewashed wall appeared a large patch of blood, exactly at the spot where I had aimed.

The Marabout went up to it, dipped his finger in the blood, and, raising it to his mouth, convinced himself of the reality. When he acquired this certainty, his arms fell, and his head was bowed on his chest, as if he were annihilated.

It was evident that for the moment he doubted everything, even the Prophet.

The spectators raised their eyes to heaven, muttered prayers, and regarded me with a species of terror.

This scene was a triumphant termination to my performance. I therefore retired, leaving the audience under the impression I had produced. We took leave of Bou-Allem and his son, and set off at a gallop.

The trick I have just described, though so curious, is easily prepared. I will give a description of it, while explaining the trouble it took me.

As soon as I was alone in my room, I took out of my pistol-case—without which I never travel—a bullet-mould.

I took a card, bent up the four edges, and thus made a sort of trough, in which I placed a piece of wax taken from one of the candles. When it was melted, I mixed with it a little lamp-black I had obtained by putting the blade of a knife over the candle, and then ran this composition in the bullet-mould.

Had I allowed the liquid to get quite cold, the ball would have been full and solid; but in about ten seconds I turned the mould over, and the portion of the wax not yet set ran out, leaving a hollow ball in the mould. This operation is the same as that used

in making tapers, the thickness of the outside depending on the time the liquid has been left in the mould.

I wanted a second ball, which I made rather more solid than the other; and this I filled with blood, and covered the orifice with a lump of wax. An Irishman had once taught me the way to draw blood from the thumb, without feeling any pain, and I employed it on this occasion to fill my bullet.

Bullets thus prepared bear an extraordinary resemblance to lead, and are easily mistaken for that metal when seen a short distance off.

With this explanation, the trick will be easily understood. After showing the leaden bullet to the spectators, I changed it for my hollow ball, and openly put the latter into the pistol. By pressing the wad tightly down, the wax broke into small pieces, and could not touch me at the distance I stood.

At the moment the pistol was fired, I opened my mouth to display the lead bullet I held between my teeth, while the other pistol contained the bullet filled with blood, which, bursting against the wall, left its imprint, though the wax had flown to atoms.

After a pleasant journey, we reached Milianah at

four in the afternoon. The head of the Arab office, Captain Bourseret, received us most kindly, and begged us to regard his house as our own during the whole time of our stay.

M. Bourseret resided with his mother, and that excellent lady showed Madame Robert-Houdin all those delicate attentions which only a friend of long standing could have claimed.

Our trip across the D'jendel had fatigued us, hence we passed the greater portion of the next day in resting ourselves.

At night, the captain gave a grand dinner, to which the general commanding, the lieutenant-colonel, and some notabilities of the town were invited. After the repast, I thought I could not better repay my polite reception than by giving a small performance, in which I displayed all my skill. As I had told M. Bourseret, during the day, of my intention, he had invited a large evening party; and I must suppose my experiments pleased, if I may judge by the greeting they received. Besides, my public were so favourably disposed towards me, that they often applauded on trust, as they could not all see very well.

Milianah was the end of my journey. I could only

remain three days, if I wished to return to Algiers in time for the steamer that would convey us to France.

M. Bourseret arranged an excursion for the second day of my stay at his house to visit the Beni-Menasseh, a nomadic tribe at that time encamped a few leagues from Milianah.

At six in the morning we took horse, accompanied by some of the captain's friends, and went down the mountain on which the town is built.

We were escorted by a dozen Arabs attached to the office, all clothed in red mantles, and armed with guns.

Orders had certainly been given beforehand, for, on reaching the plain, at the first *goum* we passed through. ten Arabs mounted their horses and formed our escort A little further on another troop joined the first, and our band, acting like a rolling snow-ball, ended by attaining considerable proportions. It was composed of about two hundred Arabs.

After two hours' march, we quitted the high road, and entered a plain that extended an immense distance in front of us.

Suddenly, the Arabs who accompanied us, probably in obedience to a signal from the chief, started off at a gallop, and proceeded five or six hundred yards ahead.

There the troop divided, formed four deep, and the men of the first file rushed upon us, uttering frenzied cries, as they held their guns to their shoulders and prepared to fire.

Our little band happened to be in front at this moment. The Arabs rushed upon us with the velocity of a steam-engine, and in a few seconds we should have suffered a collision that must have crushed us all.

A sound of firing was heard: all the horsemen had discharged their guns with admirable precision over our heads. Their horses plunged, turned on their hind legs, and started off at full speed to join the troop.

The Arab might have been taken for a perfect Centaur, when we saw him, while riding at this frantic speed, load his gun, and perform with it all the tricks peculiar to the drum-major.

The first file of horsemen had scarce retired when the second came forward, and went through a similar performance, which was repeated at least twenty times. Our captain had arranged for us the surprise of a fantasia.

At the noise of the firing some of our horses had started, but, the first moment of surprise passed, they

remained perfectly quiet. My wife's horse was an animal of approved docility, hence it was far less affected than its rider; still, every one did my wife the justice of stating that, after the first shock was over, she remained as calm as the boldest warrior among us.

The fantasia terminated, the Arabs took their place in the escort again, and within an hour we reached the tents of the Beni-Menasseh.

The Aga Ben-Amara was awaiting us. On our arrival he advanced towards us, and humbly kissed the captain's hand, while other men of his tribe, in order to do honour to our visit, discharged their guns almost under our horses' noses. But men and beasts were case-hardened, and there was not the slightest movement in our ranks.

Ben-Amara conducted us into his tent, where each sat down at his ease on a large carpet.

Our arrival caused a sensation in the tribe, for while we were smoking and drinking coffee a large number of Arabs, impelled by curiosity, ranged themselves in a circle round us, and in their immobility resembled an avenue of bronze statues.

We devoted about an hour to the pleasures of conversation, waiting for the *diffa* (meal), which we were

all impatiently desiring. We even began to find the time very long, when we saw a procession approaching, with banners at its head.

These banners puzzled me, and seemed very strange, for they were folded up. All at once the ranks of our peaceable spectators opened, and my surprise was great on finding what I took for banners were only sheep roasted whole and spitted on long poles.

Two of these sheep-bearers marched in front. They were followed by some twenty men, ranged in line, each of whom bore one of the dishes intended to compose our *diffa*.

These consisted of ragoûts and roasts of every description, the inevitable "couscoussou," and, lastly, a dozen dishes of dessert, the handiwork of Ben-Amara's wives.

This perambulating dinner was a delicious sight, especially for people whose appetite had been singularly sharpened by the fresh air and the emotions produced by the fantasia.

The head cook marched in front, and, like *M. Malbroug's* officer, carried nothing; but, so soon as he joined us, he set to work actively. Seizing one of the

sheep, he unspitted it, and laid it before us on a lordly dish.

To my companions, nearly all Algerian veterans, this gigantic roast was no novelty; as for my wife and myself, the sight of such food would have been enough to pacify our hunger under other circumstances, but now we hastened to join the circle round this gigantic dish, which was worthy of Gargantua.

We were obliged, as at Bou-Allem's, to pull the animal piecemeal with our fingers; each tore off a strip at will—I must confess, at starting, with some repugnance. Then, impelled by a ferocious appetite, we fell on the sheep like wolves, and I know not whether it was owing to the sauce we all had, but the guests unanimously declared they had never eaten anything so good as this roast mutton.

When we had selected the most delicate pieces, our cook proposed to produce the other animal, but, on our refusal, he served up roast fowls, to which we did our manly devoir. Then, turning up our noses at the pepper-pot and "couscoussou," which smelled strongly of rancid butter, we made up for the want of bread during the meal by nibbling excellent little cakes.

There was something really princely about the aga's

reception, so, to thank him, I proposed to give a small performance before my numerous spectators, who, in their passionate admiration, could not leave the ground. By their chief's orders they drew nearer and formed a circle round me. The captain was kind enough to act as my interpreter, and, thanks to him, I was enabled to perform a dozen of my best tricks. The effect produced was such that I could not possibly continue, for every one fled at my approach. Ben-Amara assured us they took me for Shaitan himself, but, had I worn the Muhammadan costume, they would have cast themselves at my feet as an envoy from Heaven.

On our return to Milianah, the captain, to crown this delicious day of pleasure, gave us the spectacle of a chase, in which the Arabs, galloping at full speed, caught hares and partridges without once firing.

The following day we took leave of M. Bourseret and his excellent mother, and proceeded towards Algiers, but not by a cross road, for we had had enough of them in traversing the D'jendel. This sort of party of pleasure, in reality a party of pain, may be agreeable for once, for it serves to revive in our inconstant minds the remembrance of the comfort we have voluntarily given up. Hence we took the diligence to

Algiers, and on this occasion fully appreciated all the advantage of this mode of transport.

The *Alexander* steamer, which had brought us from France, was to start within two days, and this was all the time I had to take leave and thank all those who had shown me so much kindness.

On quitting Algiers I had the satisfaction of being conducted on board the vessel by two officers of high rank, whose kindness I can never repay. M. Palin du Parc, Colonel of the Marine Staff, and Colonel de Neveu did not leave me till the wheels had begun to turn, and those gentlemen were the last whose hands I pressed on the African coast.

Were I to describe all my travelling incidents, I should have a great deal to narrate before I reached my hermitage at St. Gervais; but I will adhere to my expressed intention of only alluding to events connected with my professional life.

A frightful storm at sea—a tornado at the summit of the Pyrenees—death staring us in the face twenty times—are events as terrible as they are interesting to relate. But these moving episodes, which affect all alike, have been already described by far

more skilful pens than mine, hence my description would offer no novelty; I will content myself, therefore, with giving a summary of this terrible return to France.

A tempest assailed us in the Gulf of Lyons, and our engines were disabled. Our vessel, after being tossed about for nine days by the winds, at length reached the coast of Spain, and we managed to make the port of Barcelona, where the authorities would not allow us to land, as we had no passports for Spain. We coasted this inhospitable country during a frightful storm, and at length reached the little port of Rosas, where we intended to ride out the tempest.

Here I landed, and crossed the Pyrenees in an open carriage, a hurricane, the result of the tempest at sea, threatening to hurl us into an abyss at every moment. At last we safely reached France, and Marseilles, where I was obliged to fulfil a promise made to the managers of the Grand Theatre on my former passage through the town.

I was, indeed, famously recompensed for the fatigues and dangers of my journey; for the Marseillais displayed towards me such unexampled kindness, that

these last performances will ever remain on my mind as those in which I received the greatest applause. I could not take my leave of the public in a more solemn way, and I hastened my return to St. Gervais.

CONCLUSION.

I CAN, in ending this work, repeat what I said at the beginning of my penultimate chapter: "I have reached the object of my every hope." But this time, if it please God, as my guide Muhammad would say, no temptation will again come to modify my plans of happiness. I hope still for a long time (always if it please God) to enjoy that gentle and peaceful existence which I had scarce tasted when ambition and curiosity took me to Algiers.

On returning home, I arranged round my study my performing instruments, my faithful comrades, I may almost say, my dear friends; henceforth I intended to devote myself to my darling study, the application of electricity to mechanism.

It must not be believed that, for that purpose, I

disown the art to which I owe so much pleasure. The thought is far from me, I am more than ever proud of having cultivated it, as to it alone I own the happiness of devoting myself to my new studies. Besides, I diverge from it less than my readers might be inclined to suppose, for I have, during a long period, applied electricity to mechanism, and I must confess—if my readers have not already guessed it—that electricity played an important part in many of my experiments. In reality, my labours of to-day only differ from the old ones in the form; but they are still experiments.

A lingering love for my old clockmaking trade has made me choose chronometro-electrical works as the objects of my study. I have adopted as my motto, "*to popularise electric clocks by making them as simple and exact as possible.*" And as art always supposes an ideal which the artist seeks to realise, I already dream of the day when the electric wires, issuing from a single regulator, will radiate through the whole of France, and bear the precise time to the largest towns and the most modest villages.

In the mean while, devoted to the sacred cause of progress, I labour incessantly in the hope that my

humble discoveries will be of some service in the solution of this important problem.

My performance is ended (I must remind my readers that I offered them my narrative under this title); but I live in hope to begin it again soon, for I have still so many mysteries, great and small, to unveil. Sleight of hand is an immense quarry on which public curiosity can work for a long time; hence I do not take leave of my audience, or rather of my readers, for in the second form of performance I have adopted my farewell will not be definitive, until I have exhausted all that may be said about SLEIGHT OF HAND AND ITS PROFESSORS. These two words will serve as the title of the supplemental part of my Memoirs.*

* It is possible that M. Robert-Houdin intends to take this revenge, owing to the unfair way in which he was treated during his professional career. In 1850, a man who had been seven years in his service, and in whom he placed entire confidence, allowed himself to be seduced by the brilliant offers an amateur made him, and sold the secret of some of his Master's tricks at a high price. Justice was appealed to and stopped this disgraceful traffic: the seller was awarded two years' imprisonment, but the buyer could not be touched, and thus many of M. Houdin's tricks passed into strange hands.

CHAPTER IX.

A COURSE OF MIRACLES.

It has been said of the augurs, that they could not look at each other without a laugh; it would be the same with the Aïssaoua, if Mussulman blood did not flow in their veins. At any rate, there is not one among them who is deceived as to the pretended miracles performed by his brethren, but all lend a hand to execute them successfully, like a company of mountebanks, at the head of whom is the Mokaddem.

Even supposing that their pretended miracles could not be explained, a simple reflection would destroy their prestige. The Aïssaoua call themselves invulnerable—then, let them ask one of the audience to place the red-hot iron on their cheek, or some other part of their persons; they assert they are invulnerable—

then, let them invite some Zouaves to pass their sabres through them. After such a spectacle, the most incredulous would bow before them.

Were I incombustible and invulnerable, I should find a pleasure in offering undoubted proofs. I would put myself on a spit before a scorching fire, and while roasting, would amuse myself with eating a salad of pounded glass, seasoned with oil of vitriol. Such a sight would attract the whole world, and I should become a prophet.

But the Aïssaoua have reason to be prudent in the performances of these tricks, as I will prove. The principal miracles are as follow:

1. Running a dagger into the cheek.
2. Eating the leaves of the prickly pear.
3. Laying the stomach on the edge of a sabre.
4. Playing with serpents.
5. Striking the arm, causing the blood to flow, and stopping it instantaneously.
6. Eating pounded glass.
7. Swallowing pebbles, bottle-heels, &c.
8. Walking on red-hot iron, or passing the tongue over a white-hot plate of iron.

Let us begin with the most simple trick, that of thrusting a dagger into the cheek.

The Arab who performed this trick turned his back on me; hence I could get very near him and watch his movements. He placed against his cheek the point of a dagger, which was round and blunt as that of a paper-knife. The flesh, instead of being pierced, went in for about two inches between the molars, which were kept apart, exactly as a cake of india-rubber would do.

This trick is best performed by thin and aged persons, because the flesh of their cheeks is peculiarly elastic. Now, the Aïssaoua fulfilled these conditions in every respect.

The Arab who ate the prickly pear leaves gave us no opportunity of inspecting them, and I am inclined to believe that the leaves had been prepared so as to do him no injury, otherwise he would not have neglected this important point, which would have doubled the merit of the miracle. But even had he shown them to us, this man went through so many unnecessary manœuvres, that he could very easily have changed them for harmless leaves. In that case, it would be a fifteenth-rate trick of conjuring.

In the following experiment, two Arabs held a sabre, one by the hilt, the other by the point; a third then came forward, and after raising his clothes so as to leave the abdomen quite bare, laid himself flat on the edge of the blade, while a fourth mounted on his back, and seemed to press the whole weight of his body on him.

This trick may be very easily explained.

Nothing proves to the audience that the sabre is really sharpened, or that the edge is more cutting than the back, although the Arab who holds it by the point is careful to wrap it up in a handkerchief; in this imitating the jugglers who pretend they have cut their finger with one of the daggers they use in their tricks.

Besides, in performing this trick, *the invulnerable* turned his back on the audience. He knew the advantage to be derived from this circumstance; hence, at the moment when about to lay himself on the sabre, he very adroitly pulled back over his stomach that portion of his clothing he had raised. Lastly, when the fourth actor mounted on his back, he rested his hands on the shoulders of the Arabs who held the sabre. The latter apparently maintained his balance, but, in reality, they supported the whole weight of his

body. Hence, the only requirement for this trick is to have the stomach more or less pressed in, and I will explain presently that this can be effected without any injury or danger.

As for the Aïssaoua, who place their hands in a bag filled with serpents, and play with those reptiles, I will rely on Colonel de Neveu's judgment. This is what he says in his work already quoted:

"We often pushed our incredulity and curiosity so far as to order the Aïssaoua to come to our house with their menagerie. All the animals they stated to us were vipers (*lifâ*), were only innocent lizards (*hanech*), and when we offered to put our hand in the bag holding their reptiles, they hastily retired, convinced that we were not duped by their tricks."

I will add that these serpents, even had they been of a dangerous character, could have had their teeth pulled out, so as to be harmless. In support of this assertion, I noticed that these reptiles left no wound where they bit.

I did not see the trick performed of striking the arm and making the blood issue; but it seems to me that a small sponge filled with ruddle and concealed in the striking hand, would be enough to accomplish

the prodigy. On wiping the arm, the wound is necessarily cured.

When I was a boy, I often made wine come out of a knife or of my finger, by pressing a small sponge full of the liquor which I concealed in my hand.

I have often seen men champ wine-glasses between their teeth, and not hurt themselves; but not one of them swallowed the fragments. Hence, it was difficult for me to explain this trick of the Aïssaoua, till, by the assistance offered me by a physician, I found in the *Dictionnaire des Sciences Médicales* for 1810, No. 1143, a paper written by Dr. Lesauvage on the harmlessness of powdered glass.

This gentleman, after quoting various instances of people he had seen eat glass, thus describes various experiments he made on animals:

"After placing a great number of dogs, cats, and rats on a dietary of pounded glass, the fragments being two to three lines in length, not one of the animals was ill, and on opening some of them no injury could be detected all along the alimentary canal. Being convinced, too, of the harmlessness of swallowing glass, I determined to take some myself in the presence of my colleague, M. Cagel, of Professor Lalle-

mand, and several other persons. I repeated this experiment several times, and experienced not the slightest feeling of pain."

These authentic statements ought to have satisfied me; still, I wished to witness this singular phenomenon with my own eyes. Hence, I gave one of my house cats an enormous ball of meat seasoned with pounded glass. The animal swallowed it with the greatest pleasure, and seemed even to regret the end of this succulent meal. My family thought the cat booked for death, and began deploring my barbarity, but the next day the animal was perfectly well, and sniffed the spot where on the previous day it had enjoyed the meal.

Since that period, whenever I want to indulge a friend with this sight, I regale my three cats, in turn, so as not to excite any jealousy among them.

It took me some time, I confess, before I could decide on performing Dr. Lesauvage's experiment on myself, and, indeed, I saw no necessity for it. Still, one day, in the presence of a friend, I performed this bravado, if it be so; I also swallowed my bolus, though I was careful to pound my glass much finer than what I gave to my cats. I know not whether it was the

effect of imagination, but I fancied I enjoyed my dinner much more than usual: did I owe this to the pounded glass? At any rate, it would be a strange way of arousing the appetite.

When the trick of swallowing bottle-heels and pebbles was to be done, the Aïssaoua really put them in his mouth, but I believe, I may say certainly, that he removed them at the moment when he placed his head in the folds of the Mokaddem's burnous. However, had he swallowed them, there would have been nothing wonderful about this, when we compare it with what was done some thirty years back in France by a mountebank called "the sabre swallower."

This man, who performed in the streets, threw back his head so as to form a straight line with his throat, and really thrust down his gullet a sabre, of which only the hilt remained outside the mouth.

He also swallowed an egg without cracking it, or even nails and pebbles, which he caused to resound, by striking his stomach with his fist.

These tricks were the result of a peculiar formation in the mountebank's throat, but, if he had lived among the Aïssaoua, he would assuredly have been the leading man of the company.

Or what would the Arabs have said had they seen the conjuror who passed a sword right through his body, and when thus spitted, also thrust a knife into either nostril up to the handle? I witnessed this feat, and others have probably done the same.

This trick was, in reality, so terrifying, that the public would implore the man to leave off; but without troubling himself about their cries, he would reply, speaking frightfully through his nose, "that it did hib no harb," and sing in this singular voice the "*Fleuve du Tage*," which he accompanied on a guitar.

I could not endure the sight of this trick, and would turn my head away in horror when the troubadour drew out the sword, and begged us to notice that it was stained with blood.

Still, on reflection, I was certain the man could not really pierce his stomach thus, and that there must be some trick concealed.

My love of the marvellous made me desire to know it; hence, I applied to the *invulnerable*, and on condition of a certain sum, and promises not to use it, he sold me his secret.

I may, in my turn, communicate it to the public

without asking from them the same promise. The trick is, however, rather ingenious.

The performer was very thin—an indispensable quality for the success of the trick. He pressed in his stomach very tightly with a waist-belt, and produced the following result: the vertebral column being unable to bend, served as a support, and the intestines gave way and fell in about half the space they originally occupied. The mountebank then substituted for the suppressed part a cardboard stomach which restored him to his original condition, and the whole being concealed beneath a flesh-colour *tricot*, appeared to form part of his body. On either side, above the hips, two ribbon rosettes hid the apertures by which the sword-point would go in and out, these openings being connected by a leathern scabbard which led the weapon securely from one end to the other, while, in order to produce the blood, a sponge filled with a red liquid was placed in the middle of the sheath. The knives in the nostrils were a reality. The *invulnerable* was very pug-nosed, which allowed him to draw the cartilage of the nose up prior to the introduction of the knives.

I possessed the necessary physical qualifications for

the sabre trick, but none for that of the knives. I did not attempt the first, much less the second.

By the way, I may remark that, when a lad, I used to perform two *miracles*, which might be useful to the Aïssaoua, if they were ever told of them. I will explain them here.

The corn-curer who taught me to juggle, also showed me a very curious trick, consisting in thrusting a small nail into the right eye, which is then made to pass into the left eye, thence into the mouth, and end by returning into the right eye.

It may be imagined how I burned with the fire of necromancy, since I had the courage to practise this trick, which I found charming. A very disagreeable circumstance, however, deprived me of my faith in the effect produced by it.

I sometimes spent the evening at a lady's house who had two daughters. I thought I could not select a better place for my first performance, and asked leave to do the trick. Of course this permission was granted, and a circle was formed round me.

"Ladies," I said, with a certain degree of emphasis, "I am invulnerable. To furnish you with a proof, I could easily stab myself with a dagger, a knife, or any

other sharp instrument; but I fear lest the sight of blood might produce too agitating an effect on you. Hence, I will offer you another proof of my supernatural powers." And I performed my famous trick of "the nail in the eye."

The effect of this scene was most unexpected, for the performance was scarce over ere one of the young ladies was taken ill and fainted. The evening's amusement was disturbed, as may be supposed, and fearing some recriminations, I bolted without saying a word, declaring that I would never be caught again at such tricks.

This, however, is the explanation of the trick:

A small lead or silver pin may be introduced, without the slightest feeling of pain, in the corner of the eye, near the lacrymal duct, between the lower eyelid and the pupil; and, strangely enough, this piece of metal once introduced, you do not in the least notice its presence. To bring it out again, you need only press it with the finger.

If desirous to perform the trick I have alluded to, you proceed in the following way:

After secretly placing one of these small nails in the left eye, and another in the mouth, you commence as follows:

You openly thrust a nail into your right eye, then, pressing the skin with the end of the finger, you pretend to pass it through the nose into the left eye, whence you withdraw the one put in beforehand. This you return again to the eye, and the nail appears to pass into the mouth, whence you produce the one already hidden there, and thence into the right eye, whence you withdraw the one originally inserted.

When this is done, you go on one side and remove the nail still remaining in the left eye.

But, to return to the last trick of the Aïssaoua, which consists in walking over hot iron, and passing the tongue over incandescent plates of the same metal.

The Aïssaoua who walks over hot iron does nothing extraordinary, if we consider the conditions under which the trick is performed.

He quickly glides his heel along the iron; but the lower-class Arabs, who all walk with naked feet, have the lower part of the foot as hard as a horse's hoof, hence, this horny part burns without occasioning the slightest pain.

And, besides, may not chance have taught the Aïssaoua certain precautions known to more than one

European juggler, before Dr. Sementrici proved their use and explained them to the public?

Let us quote some performances of our own mountebanks, and we shall find that the followers of Aïssa as miracle-mongers are a long way behindhand in their pretended marvels.

In February, 1677, an Englishman, of the name of Richardson, came to Paris, and gave some very curious performances, which proved, according to his statement, his incombustibility.

He was seen to roast a piece of meat on his tongue, light a piece of charcoal in his mouth by means of a pair of bellows, seize a bar of red-hot iron in his hand, or hold it between his teeth.

This Englishman's servant published his master's secret, which may be found in the *Journal des Sciences.**

In 1809, a Spaniard, of the name of Leonetto, gave performances at Paris. He also handled a bar of red-hot iron with impunity, passed it through his hair, or stepped upon it; drank boiling oil, plunged his fingers into melted lead, put some on his tongue, and

* 1677, first edition, page 41, and second edition, 1680, pp. 24, 147, 252.

ended his performance by licking a piece of red-hot iron.

This extraordinary man attracted the attention of Professor Sementrici, who began carefully watching him.

The professor remarked that the tongue of the *incombustible* was covered with a grey layer, and this discovery led him to try some experiments on himself. He discovered that rubbing in a solution of alum, evaporated to a spongy state, rendered the skin insensible to the action of red-hot iron. He also rubbed himself with soap, and found that even the hair did not burn when in that state.

Satisfied with these investigations, the physician rubbed his tongue with soap and a solution of alum, and the red-hot iron produced no sensation on him.

The tongue, when thus prepared, could also receive boiling oil, which grew cold, and could then be swallowed.

M. Sementrici also detected that the melted lead Leonetto employed was only Arcet's metal, fusible at the temperature of boiling water. (For further details

consult the historic notice of M. Julia de Fontenelle, in Roret's *Manuel des Sorciers*, page 181.)

These explanations may appear sufficient to disprove the pretended incombustibility of the Aïssaoua; still, I will add a personal fact, whence the conclusion can be drawn that a man need not be inspired by Allah or Aïssa to play with red-hot metals.

Reading one day the *Comus*, a scientific review, I found a critique of a work called *Study on Bodies in a Spheroidal Shape*, by M. Boutigny (d'Evreux). The editor of the review, the Abbé Moigno, quotes several of the most interesting passages, among them being the following:

"We passed our fingers through jets of red-hot metal" (M. Boutigny is speaking). "We plunged our hands into moulds and crucibles filled with metal that had just run from a Wilkinson, and of which the radiation was insupportable, even at a long distance. We carried on these experiments for more than two hours, and Madame Coulet, who was present, allowed her daughter, a child of from eight to ten years, to put her hand in a crucible of red-hot metal, which caused not the slightest injury."

Knowing the character of the learned abbé, as well as that of the celebrated naturalist and author of the work, it was not possible to doubt: still, I must say, this fact appeared to me so impossible, that my mind refused to accept it, and I wished to see, that I might believe.

I decided on calling on M. Boutigny, and expressed to him my wish to see so interesting an experiment, while carefully avoiding any expression of doubt on the subject.

This gentleman received me kindly, and proposed to repeat the experiment before me, when I might have an opportunity to wash my hands in molten metal.

The proposition was attractive, scientifically speaking; but, on the other hand, I had some fears, which the reader will appreciate, I think. In the event of a mistake I should reduce my hands to charcoal, and I was bound to take the greater care of them as they had been such precious instruments to me. Hence I hesitated with my reply.

"Do you not place confidence in me?" M. Boutigny asked.

"Oh, certainly, sir, I have plenty of confidence, but——"

"But you are afraid—out with it!" the doctor interrupted me, with a laugh. "Well, to ease your mind, I will try the temperature of the liquid before you place your hands in it."

"And what is about the temperature of molten metal?"

"Close on one thousand six hundred degrees."

"One thousand six hundred degrees?" I exclaimed. "Oh! the experiment must be splendid: I consent."

On the day appointed by M. Boutigny, we proceeded to Mr. Davidson's foundry at La Villette, after he had granted us permission to make the experiment.

I was strangely affected on entering this vast establishment; the deafening noise produced by the immense blasts, the flames escaping from the furnaces, the sparkling jets transported by powerful machines and running into gigantic moulds, the wiry, muscular workmen, blackened by smoke and dust,—all this medley of men and things produced a strange and rather solemn effect upon me.

The manager came up to us and pointed out the furnace to which we were to proceed for our experiment.

While waiting for a jet of metal to run, we remained for a few moments in silence near the furnace; then we commenced the following conversation, which was certainly not of a nature to encourage me:

"I would only repeat this experiment, which I am not fond of, for your sake," M. Boutigny said; "I confess that, though I am morally sure of the result, I always feel an emotion which I cannot dispel."

"If that be the case," I replied, "suppose we go? I will believe your word."

"No, no; I am bound to show you this curious phenomenon. But, by the way," the learned doctor added, "let me see your hands."

He took them in his.

"Hang it," he went on, "they are very dry for our experiment."

"You think so?"

"Certainly."

"Then it is dangerous?"

"It might be so."

"In that case, we will go," I said, turning to the door.

"That would be a pity," my companion replied, holding me back; "stay, dip your hands in this bucket of water, dry them well, and they will be sufficiently damp."

I must mention that to ensure the success of this marvellous experiment no other condition is requisite than to have the hands slightly damp. I regret I can offer no explanations as to the principle of the phenomenon, for this would require many a long chapter; hence I will refer my readers to M. Boutigny's work. It will be enough to state that the metal, when in a state of fusion, is kept at a distance from the skin by a repulsive force, which opposes an insurmountable barrier.

I had scarce finished wiping my hands when the furnace was opened, and a jet of molten metal, about the thickness of my arm, burst forth. Sparks flew in every direction, as if it were a firework performance.

"Wait a few minutes," M. Boutigny said, "till the metal is cleansed, for it would be dangerous to try our experiment at this moment."

Five minutes later the stream of liquid fire left off bubbling and emitting scoriæ; it became, indeed, so limpid and brilliant, that it scorched our eyes at a few yards off.

All at once my companion walked up to the furnace, and calmly began washing his hands in the metal as if it had been lukewarm water.

I make no pretence to bravery; I confess at this moment my heart beat as if it would burst, and yet, when M. Boutigny ended his strange ablutions, I walked forward in my turn with a determination that proved a certain strength of will. I imitated my professor's movements, I literally dabbled in the burning liquid, and, in my joy, inspired by this marvellous operation, I took a handful of the metal and threw it in the air, and it fell back in a fire-shower on the ground.

The impression I felt in touching this molten iron can only be compared to what I should have experienced in handling liquid velvet, if I may express myself so.

I now ask what are the red-hot bars of the Aïssaoua, in comparison to the enormous temperature to which my hands had been exposed?

The old and new miracles of the incombustibles are, therefore, explained by the experiments of a skilful naturalist, who, while making no pretence to trickery, only appreciates such phenomena in their relation to the immutable laws by virtue of which they are accomplished.

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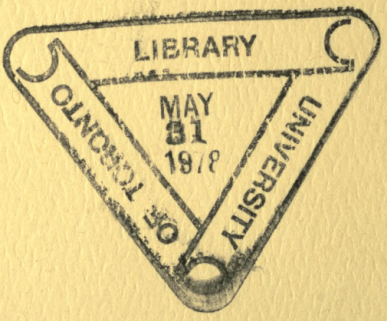
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